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**Uncovering Injustice:  
Towards a Dalit Feminist Politics in Bangalore**

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## Abstract

This research is interested in unpacking the injustice that dalit groups, men and women, identify as structuring their lives, as well as the strategies deployed to resist, disrupt and subvert the violence. It is also interested in elucidating the tensions in accounting for caste relations, as well as a gendered conception of dalit relations in Bangalore. The dalit women question has received increasing scholarly as well as political attention in the last couple of decades. However, there is very little literature that seeks to locate the conditions of dalit women's lives in the context of urban spaces.

Understanding gendered caste relations in the space of the city has been no easy process. This is not only because of the conceptual and historical disjunction between caste and class, but also because of the disjunction between caste and conceptions of the space of the city. The over-determination of the centrality of 'the village' in the literature on caste does not easily allow for a conception of caste relations in the city. Moreover, the space of the city as a space of freedom in the dalit imagination makes it difficult to locate a critical conception of urban spaces for a dalit politics. In relation to a gendered dalit politics, the need for an internal critique of the patriarchy of dalit politics whilst over-determined, has not produced a robust critique of intra-caste relations. This is also because in demarcating the specific conditions of dalit women's lives, a gendered dalit politics tends to get caught up in a 'politics of difference'.

Based on primary research with three dalit groups in the city of Bangalore and secondary material, this thesis locates the politics around the naming of identity and the ways in which 'dalit' identity has been avowed, disavowed, contested and sometimes not confronted at all, by the groups, and what this means for a dalit politics as well as a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore. It also analyses the politics of naming the injustice of untouchability and the strategies deployed by the respondents to contend with the violence. It provides a gendered account of untouchability and an analysis of untouchability in relation to the city. Moreover, it locates the conditions of dalit women's lives, both in terms of the work that they do in the city, as well as the burdens of responsibility that they shoulder. By using Fraser's analytical tools of 'culture' and 'economics', this thesis hopes to subvert the disjunction between caste and class; and by using her framework of recognition, redistribution, affirmation and transformation, it hopes to assess the strategies employed by the groups in identifying and contending with the injustice that they experience.

As part of an on-going dialogue with dalit groups that I met in the course of my research, this research holds with it the hope that it may be useful as a resource in the dalit political project.

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# Introduction

The last couple of decades have seen a burgeoning scholarship on caste and gender in India. A necessary outcome of this process has been the unearthing of the subject of dalit women. A recent anthology on caste and gender (Rao, 2003) with a specific focus on dalit women, reflects the increased interest in the field of a gendered dalit scholarship. This has been in tandem with, and the consequence of, several political developments around the question of dalit women.

In the August of 1995, an autonomous organisation, the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was formed as the result of a process that began in 1987 with a national consultation on the struggles and aspirations of dalit women in Bangalore and then in Delhi and Pune (Guru, 1995; Manorama, 2000). Several other groups such as the All India Dalit Women's Forum, were also formed in the 1990s<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, the 'dalit women' question has also received international attention, with the United Nations Conference Against All Forms of Racism attesting to a forceful dalit women contingent<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a proliferation of groups interested in the dalit women's question across the country in the past decade. A few of them were formed in collaboration with the Joint Women's Programme, such as the All India Dalit Women's Programme, and its various regional offshoots. For an account of groups in Maharashtra and elsewhere see Rege (2000) and Rao (2003b). In recent times, there has been an increased visibility of the dalit women's question in the mainstream women's movement. In December, 1998 the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) held a convention against untouchability and dalit women's oppression (Malik, 1999), the Tamil Nadu unit of the AIDWA held four district-level conventions of dalit women over two years (Sivaraman, 2000). In Sep-Oct, 2001, I attended a 'Young Feminists Conference' in Hyderabad where the dalit women's contingent was very strong and effective. This visibility stands along with the 'notoriety' achieved by groups such as the Dalit Women's Sena (Dalit Women's Army -Burke, 1999; also see [www.dalitsena.com](http://www.dalitsena.com)) and the assassinated dalit woman, 'dacoit', and political leader, Phoolan Devi.

<sup>2</sup> See interview with Ruth Manorama (Srinivas, Shefali, 2001). The NFDW passed an NGO declaration on Gender and Racism at the UN Conference, with specific reference to the descent based discrimination suffered by dalit women (Rao, 2003a: appendix). Also see Human Rights Watch, 1999. The international interest in dalit women is moreover related to a growing international dalit political network (Kumar, V, 2003).

The basis of the formation (and proliferation) of these autonomous groups was the argument that dalit women were invisible, both in the women's movement and in the dalit movement, because of which dalit women needed a separate platform to forge their own identity and find solutions to their problems, as dalits and as women (Pawar, 1994; Guru, 1995; Bandhu, 1995; Rege, 1998; Manorama, 2000; Thorat, 2001). The broad framework within which this specificity of dalit women's experience has been articulated is in terms of the three-fold discrimination of *caste*, *class* and *gender*.

In this thesis, I am concerned with attending to a specific circumstance of the three-fold discrimination against dalit women in the space of the city of Bangalore. The basis on which I started this research was a perceived silence on gendered caste relations in urban spaces. However, understanding caste relations in the space of the city has been no easy process, because of the experienced sense of inability in accounting for caste-based injustice in urban spaces, not only in the literature but also amongst the activists and respondents that I met. The conception of the space of the city as conducive to caste-free relations sits uneasily alongside moments of recognition forced by incidents and evidence that caste continues to be a major source of oppression in the modern city.

In the cosmopolitan air of the law school that I attended in the hi-tech city of Bangalore, the rolls of students who entered its prestigious annals were marked in an order of 'merit', the ones with the highest marks in its competitive exam to the ones who joined based on the state's reservation policies. The symbolic violence associated with this insidious marking out and making visible dalit status, allows us a



glimpse not just into the pervasive violence of being associated with particular caste communities, but also to the existence of caste-based discrimination in 'cosmopolitan' universities and necessarily in the space of the city. The Joint Action Committee report (2000) on the extent of caste-based injustice and discrimination in Hyderabad Central University as well as the study on caste-based sexual violence by J Indira (1997) attest to the bitter ironies of the violence of caste in the supposedly 'metropolitan' spaces of universities and cities.

Whilst the campaigns that followed in the law school to change the system of rolls were successful, this thesis is concerned with confronting the wider context of caste relations in the city, for a gendered dalit politics in Bangalore. I am interested in unpacking understandings of injustice amongst dalit groups, men and women, to elucidate the tensions in accounting for caste relations, as well as in articulating a gendered conception of dalit relations in Bangalore.

This research offers an account as well as modes of uncovering the injustices experienced by dalit men and women in Bangalore. Further, this thesis, as part of an on-going dialogue with dalit groups that I met in the course of my research, holds with it the hope that it may be a useful resource in the dalit political project. It is based on primary research using focus group discussions and interviews with three dalit groups, the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvali (Dalit and Women's Movement – DMC), the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (Group for the Struggle for Reservation for Madiga Communities - MRHS) and the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM) between May 2001-March 2002.

In Chapter 1, the literature review, I start with an overview of the material on caste to locate the theoretical moorings of anti-caste struggles. Whilst examining the predominance of understandings of caste as ritual hierarchy, I argue that there is a disjunction between the economic and cultural aspects of injustice, both conceptually as well as historically in relation to class and caste struggles. I also argue that an understanding of the village as encapsulating Indian society predominates. In reviewing the material on caste and the city, I locate the difficulties in a critical examination of urban spaces for a dalit politics.

In relation to the literature on caste and gender, I locate the dominance of the themes of controls on sexuality and access to economic resources in accounting for the particular conditions of women's lives as well as the differences *between* women. Whilst examining the tendencies to a disjunction between the material and symbolic aspects of injustice in this literature, I also locate the difficulties and absences in accounting for caste-specific (dalit) patriarchies.

In Chapter 2, the chapter on methodology, I set out the processes of research and production of this thesis. Whilst locating the messiness of field work, I examine the methodological and ethical issues around researching dalit women. I also examine the ways in which the research was shaped and re-formulated as a consequence of my field work and my interaction with the respondents. I identify the DMC, MRHS and the KDWM as the primary groups that I chose to analyse. I examine the processes of networking that allowed me an 'insider' access to dalit groups in Bangalore. In this chapter, I also locate the difficulties underlying a 'politics of difference' that structured my initial theorising as well as in a dalit feminist



methodology that centres difference. I argue that a standpoint methodology, which centres dalit women's lives confronts this politics of difference, but does not necessarily provide the analytical tools to address the dichotomy between cultural and economic aspects of injustice, especially in its specific manifestation in caste-class debates in India. I argue that Nancy Fraser's framework of a perspectival dualism, even though its provenance was the US and Europe, offers flexible and adaptable analytical tools that allow for an integration of the social and the cultural politics of caste and class groups and movements.

In the third chapter, I set out the context of the research, providing a situated history of the city of Bangalore and of dalit politics in Karnataka. I lay out a brief history of Bangalore to provide a background for the caste, linguistic, spatial and gendered divisions that existed prior to independence. Post-independence, I examine the registers of the 'remembered and imagined city', which along with the policies of liberalisation, provide a stark context for the increasing illegitimation of the claims of the urban poor. I examine the demography, the gendered and caste profiles of people living in the slums as well as the socio-economic conditions of the slums.

I examine the early politics of the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS) to situate the influences on a dalit politics in the context of the city. I interrogate the ways in which the DSS conceptualised dalit politics in terms of caste, class and gender, as well as the primacy it gave to the village and rural life. From the accounts of slum and dalit politics in this chapter, I argue that there is a priority given to redistributive strategies in slum politics, whilst the many fissures in the DSS attest to the contestations

between redistributive and recognition strategies in dalit politics in Karnataka. In such a context, I argue it becomes imperative to locate a dalit politics in Bangalore.

In Chapter 4, I analyse the specific politics of the groups to illuminate caste relations as well as a gendered analysis of caste relations in Bangalore. In this chapter, I examine the politics around naming of identity and the purposes for which the groups were set up. I examine the ways in which 'dalit' identity has been avowed, disavowed, contested and sometimes not confronted at all, by the groups and what this means for a dalit politics as well as a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore. I locate the processes of the groups in terms self-identification as well as identification by others, using Fraser's framework of affirmation, transformation, redistribution and recognition.

In Chapter 5, which is divided into two parts, I engage with the specific injustices that each of the groups identified as structuring their lives, as 'dalits' and in particular, as dalit women. In part one, I analyse the politics of naming the injustice of untouchability and the ways in which different groups have sought to contest and disrupt it. I also provide a gendered analysis of untouchability and an analysis of untouchability in the context of the city. Identifying food relations and work as the most predominant modes with which the respondents accounted for the injustice of untouchability, I analyse the ways in which we can account for the injustice of untouchability in terms of the analytical categories of culture and economics. With regard to the politics of food, I argue that there is a broad food hierarchy in India, at the heart of which is the principle of the sacredness of the cow and an understanding



of a graded hierarchy of living things. I examine in the discourses of the respondents, strategies at disrupting this hierarchy.

In the next part of this chapter, I interrogate work relations as accounting for untouchability in the city by examining the work that dalit women do in the city, the meanings of the work, and the strategies for transformation. Further, since the politics of untouchability is also connected to the constructions of sexuality of women, I unravel the meanings of menstruation in accounting for a gendered understanding of untouchability for *dalit* women. I further elaborate on the sexual division of labour amongst dalit communities by locating the responsibilities that dalit women shoulder and the strategies for transformation.

In my concluding chapter, I argue that it is important to confront the conception of the city as conducive to caste-free life. I examine the extent to which the dalit groups that I interacted with, allow for a gendered conception of caste relations in the context of the city. In accounting for the tensions that I locate in the strategies of the groups, I assess the usefulness of Fraser's framework of affirmation and transformation.

This thesis is concerned with contributing to and furthering the dialogue on gendered caste relations with dalit groups in the city of Bangalore. The larger contribution is in opening a dialogue on the usefulness of the framework set out for an integrated theory of caste, class and gender in urban spaces.

# Chapter 1

## Literature Review

### Introduction

In this thesis, I am concerned with attending to the three-fold discrimination of caste, class and gender, against dalit women in the context of the city of Bangalore. I am interested in unpacking understandings of injustice amongst dalit groups, to locate the particular conditions of dalit women's lives, as well as the particular tensions in articulating a dalit feminist position in Bangalore. Therefore, there are several sets of literature that are relevant to my research. The themes of caste, class and gender in the city and the ways in which these themes have been understood in relation to one another form the bulk of this chapter.

There is very little material that ties the subjects of caste, class and gender in the context of urban space. Therefore, the specific purpose with which I engage with the material on caste, class and gender is to locate the ways in which we can conceptualise the dalit woman subject in the city. I start with an overview of the material on caste to locate the theoretical moorings of anti-caste struggles. I examine the tendencies towards a disjunction between the material (economic) and symbolic (cultural) aspects of injustice, in the literature on class and caste, respectively. Thereafter, I examine the predominance of 'the village' in the literature on caste. I also analyse the literature that talks of the protean nature of caste in the urban context and examine dalit conceptions of rural and urban spaces. In reviewing the material



on caste and the city, I locate the difficulties in a critical examination of urban spaces for a dalit politics.

In the next section, I examine the literature on caste and gender. The themes of controls on sexuality and access to economic resources dominate in the material. I locate the tendencies to a disjunction between the material and symbolic aspects of injustice in this literature and the difficulties and absences in accounting for caste-specific (dalit) patriarchies.

## **Caste: An Overview**

Debates on the definition, characteristics and essences of caste, partake in (contested) conceptions of castes as stratified, ascriptive, endogamous social groups based on occupational roles/division of labour, and maintained by a symbolic system founded on the opposition between pollution and purity. They also engage with the implication that, amongst other things, members of groups 'lower' down the caste order cannot/do not share social spaces, social activities (except in hierarchical cultural-economic fashion), and do not have access to resources such as land, education and jobs. Practices such as 'untouchability', segregation, ostracisation and bonded labour are understood as reflecting the violent spectrum of the lives of people of 'lower' caste communities.

To give expression to a truism, the literature on caste is indeed vast. When Hutton published his book on caste in India in 1946, there were already over 5000 works on

it (Unnithan-Kumar, 1997: 7). The term itself, 'caste-casta'<sup>1</sup> has been traced to the Portuguese travellers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries who traded on the west coasts of India and especially to Duarte Barbosa, who, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, is said to have reported features of a caste order after extended stays in the Vijaynagara kingdom (Quigley, 1993: 4; Dirks, 2001: 19). Since Barbosa, the term has been invoked by colonial missionaries, ethnographers, anthropologists, company and colonial officers, by the radical and reform movements of the pre-independence years, and since independence, by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political theorists, literary writers and theorists, politicians, law-makers and radical movements of various hues for varying purposes<sup>2</sup>.

To invoke the term 'caste' is to engage in a web of inter-connected debates. Questions about whether or not caste is distinctive to Indian society or typical of it, whether or not it is exclusive to Hinduism, whether or not it is an ancient indigenous category, a colonial artefact, a product of academic exercises or an identity, as well as its nature as a descriptive and analytical tool abound in much of the literature on caste (Dumont, 1970; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994; Quigley, 1994; Unnithan, 1994; Dirks: 2001; Sharma, U, 2002).

Inter-woven in this web are distinctions from, and the 'nexus' between, communities based on the analytical and descriptive categories of race, class, ethnicity, tribe and religion. While I shall discuss certain aspects of the relationship between caste and

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<sup>1</sup> The English term 'cast' meaning race in the context of 1555 (Dumont, 1970: 23) and its French spelling, 'caste' Quigley suggests come from *casta* (1993: 4).

<sup>2</sup> For some good reviews of the material on caste, see Galanter (1984), Sharma, KL (1994a, 1994b), Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma (1994), Unnithan-Kumar (1997), Bayly (1999), Dirks (2001), Sharma, U (2002).

religion and caste and class later (see below), as Ursula Sharma (2002: 15-20) tells us, the concept of caste was used for the purposes of explaining racial segregation politics in the United States of the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore, it was used to explain 'segregation' in terms of 'social' processes as against genetics in these accounts; it was also used instead of 'ethnic groups', which it was thought did not convey the 'enforced social distance between blacks and whites and the apparent permanence of this division' (2002: 17). While there were further (and later) interjections in this debate by academics such as Oliver Cromwell Cox, who argued that the concept of caste could not be used outside of the caste *hierarchy* in India, theorists such as Gerald Berreman made the opposite claim, that there were comparisons to be made between the two social systems, especially in terms of recognising them as exercises in power (Sharma, U, 2002: 17-20; 1994: 72-85).

These debates elucidate several tensions: on the one hand, that the concept of caste is distinct from ethnicity, which is understood as reflecting 'differences in culture' between communities rather than structural inequality. On the other hand stands an understanding of caste as a holistic hierarchy specific to, and typical of, India. However, as Ursula Sharma has indicated, there are studies that allow for comparisons between the two as exercises in power. While these tensions continue to hold sway, it is worthwhile pointing out that the notion of ethnicity, in terms of 'differences in culture' has also, as Rudolf Heredia (2000: 48) has suggested, been readily used to distinguish between caste and tribe. Maya Unnithan (1994: 92-94) has argued that the understanding that tribal communities are *outside* of the caste *hierarchy*, allows for a polarisation between egalitarianism and hierarchy in the conceptions of tribe and caste, respectively. She however suggests that this



polarisation is not just in terms of culture, but also in conceptions of the division of labour amongst caste and tribal communities.

Therefore, while on the one hand comparisons have been made between caste and race to situate the politics in the United States (and India), on the other, there have been debates about whether there are 'racial' explanations for the origins of the caste system in India. These debates have their antecedents in the radical politics of figures such as Jotiba Phule (O' Hanlon, 1985). There have also been comparative studies on the politics of dalit and black movements (Singh, KP, 1999) as well as black and dalit feminist theory and politics (Indira, J, 1997). More recently, questions about the relationship between race and caste have come to be debated with renewed vigour in the light of the United Nations Conference Against Racism and Other Related Discrimination, held between August 31- September 7, 2001 in Durban<sup>3</sup>. These debates, while centred on the nature of caste and race as descriptive and analytical tools, gained political urgency, situated as they were in the realpolitick of focussing international attention on the condition of dalit communities in India.

While some of the debates on caste explain and analyse the caste system, especially in terms of analysing social change (Srinivas, MN, 1962, 1966), writings on caste from the perspective of dalit communities seek to *critique* the structure of caste for the relations that it sustains, through the languages of exploitation, oppression and injustice, in order to *change* them. As Simon Charsley has argued, 'the difference in

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of the Durban Conference, there have been several highly contested public interjections by dalit activists and academics. See especially the December 2001 volume of the journal *Seminar*, Beteille (2001); Omvedt (2001a, 2001b); Vishwanathan (2001a, 2001b) and for an extended list of references, see the background readings for the symposium on 'Beyond Durban: Race and Caste Dialogues' held at the University of Iowa, available at [www.uiowa.edu](http://www.uiowa.edu)



orientation [between the two streams] is important, though no firm line can be drawn' (1998b: 51; also see Aloysius, 1997). The writings of social leaders such as BR Ambedkar (Rodrigues, 2002), Gandhi (Chanchreek, 1991), Periyar (Geetha, 1998b; no date), Jotiba Phule (O'Hanlon, 1985) as well as the dalit movements of the early part of the last century and the present (Omvedt, 1993, 1995; Aloysius, 1997), fall within this critique of caste, in that they are specifically characterised as *anti-caste* struggles.

There is a vast literature that seeks to understand caste as identity (Sharma, U, 1994; 2002; Unnithan, 1994; Unnithan-Kumar, 1997). Ursula Sharma has argued that such analyses seek to understand caste in terms of cultural difference or ethnicity, rather than a matter of social or moral philosophy (2002: 40-41). Unnithan-Kumar however, makes distinctions between an analysis of 'ethnicity' and identity when she suggests in her gendered study of the 'tribal' Girasia identity in Rajasthan, that she is interested in the processes and politics of social relationships, which are not necessarily 'ethnically' exclusive. The argument that she makes is that she is concerned less with the *categories* of caste and tribe and more with the ways in which communities choose to represent themselves, or are powerless in the ways in which they are represented by others. Such a perspective, she argues, allows for an analysis of the *construction* of Girasia identity as tribal identity, while simultaneously situating the conditions, as well as the perceptions, of poverty amongst the communities (1997: 2-32).

Vivek Dhareshwar (1995a) makes a similar argument when he suggests that it is more useful to analyse 'caste as process' rather than 'caste as substance'.

Dhareshwar's specific criticism is of works that seek to explain social change in India, asking questions such as 'how has caste changed?' His argument is that it might be more useful to analyse the shifting meanings of caste relations. However, an understanding of caste as structure and especially as ritual hierarchy (Dumont, 1970) resonates amongst the literature. This is particularly important since it has been suggested (Dirks, 2001) that the debates between Ambedkar and Gandhi on the nature of caste in India, and especially its relation to Hinduism, fall within an understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy.

However, I suggest that understanding caste in terms of ritual hierarchy throws up some questions for the intersection of 'caste and class' that seems to have become a catch-phrase (Mukherjee, 1999) in much of literature. These questions pertain to the distinctions between caste and class as well as the ways in which they have been understood together, as concepts and as groups. Conceptually, the links are in terms of the 'economic' content of caste. Division of labour, occupation, ritual calling and rendering of services, are some of the 'caste-based' concepts that find a place in these debates. The connections with the 'other' economic criteria of access to resources and opportunities such as land, education, jobs are also part of this debate.

Part of the debate on the 'nexus' between caste and class are analyses of social change in terms of caste *becoming* class, or changes *within* the caste hierarchy (Srinivas, MN, 1962, 1966). Still further, there are links to be made between conceptions of 'social change' and caste in the urban space. I shall suggest that an analysis of caste in the urban context has to contend with the ways in which city space itself is conceived and this is related to conceptions of the village/city in the

dalit imaginary. Therefore, I shall argue that to comprehend caste relations in the city, we have to analyse not only the ways in which caste and social change are understood in the urban context, but also the ways in which dalit communities engage with this space.

I start by engaging with understandings of the terms ‘caste’, ‘varna’ and ‘jati’ to situate the constructions of the ‘caste system’ which give them coherence.

### *Caste, Varna and Jati*

The word *casta*, from which the term ‘caste’ is supposed to have derived, has been understood variously as, ‘properly something not mixed, from the Latin, *castus*, chaste’ (Dumont, 1970: 21) and ““species” or “breeds” of animals or plants and “tribes”, “races”, “clans” or “lineages” among men’ (Quigley, quoting Marriott and Inden, 1993: 4). Sheth suggests that when Barbosa used the term, he used it to refer to India’s ‘varna-jati’ system (1999: 2502). Quigley on the other hand, suggests that it was an unhappy translation of the indigenous terms of *varna* and *jati* (1993: 4) and Dumont traces a source who indicates that Barbosa might have referred to the ‘lowest Indian classes in contradistinction to their overlords’ (Dumont, 1970: 347; Dirks, 2001: 19).

The ‘varna-jati’ system that Sheth suggests Barbosa identified, however, is repeatedly traced to its classical enunciation in the cosmic creation story found in the *Rg Veda* and elaborated upon in the *Manu Dharma Sastras*. Though the *Rg Veda* does not use the term *varna* to refer to the four orders (Srinivas, MN, 1962: 63), the

first created man, the sacrificed thousand-eyed Purusa of the *Rg Veda*, is understood to embody the *varna* order in his dismembered fragments:

When they divided the Purusa, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are his thighs and feet called? The *brahmin* was his mouth, his two arms were made the *rajanya* [*kshatriya*], his two thighs the *vaisya*, from his feet the *sudra* was born. (quoted in Bayly, 1999: 13)

This symbolically violent enunciation is elaborated upon in terms of the *Varna-asrama-dharma*<sup>4</sup>, again classically credited to the mythical Manu whose laws it is suggested, are probably traceable to the first century AD (Bayly, 1999: 14). The understanding of (a male) caste society as dividable into four distinct divisions called *varnas* (the ‘untouchables’ being beyond the pale), with its classical sanction traceable to the Vedas and the Dharma Sastras, reverberates in much of the literature. Susan Bayly suggests that the commonly understood notion of *varna* is as a ranked order of precedence, with idealised human callings appearing in the following order:

The varna of Brahmans, commonly identified with those fulfilling the callings of priests and spiritual preceptors; [...] The varna of Kshatriyas, usually associated with rulers and warriors, but also including seigneurial landed groups; [...] The varna of Vaishyas, often identified with commercial livelihoods, though associated with other producers and wealth-creators as well [...] The varna of Shudras or servile toilers. (1999: 8-9)

The connections of this conception of *varna* in terms of its relation to caste, as well as to Hinduism has been debated, most famously by Ambedkar and Gandhi. I shall elaborate on this debate in the section on Ambedkar and Gandhi (below). In contrast to this (contested) understanding of *varna* as an order of calling, lies the ubiquitous everyday term of identification, *jati*. Bayly argues that the term *jati* is understood as

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<sup>4</sup> *Varnashramadharma*, as elaborated upon in the *Manu*, is understood as elucidating the social obligations and duties for various castes as well as individuals at various stages of life, and prescribing the nature of social and sexual relations between men and women of different castes, amongst other things. The text, Dirks suggests, ‘is about dharma, which means duty as well as law, religion as well as practice’ (2001: 34).



being the 'localised' birth group as against the order, class or kind of *varna* (1999: 8).

The distinctions between *jati* as the 'concrete and factual' domain of everyday social life, as opposed to the 'ideal and symbolic archetypes embodied in the concept of *varna*', are attributable to the anthropologist, RS Khare (see Bayly, 1999: 9). Quigley on the other hand, argues that *jatis*, which he suggests refers to groups based on kinship and marriage, are not subsets of *varnas*. *Jatis* do not, he maintains, easily fit into the *varna* classification of 'social functions' (1994: 29-31).

Andre Beteille (1965: 46), however, argues that the term 'caste' is used as a replacement for *jati* while also denoting the concept of *varna*. While he also suggests that some have sought to resolve the confusion by using the terms 'caste' and 'sub-caste', he argues:

*Varna* refers to one of the four main categories into which Hindu society is divided; *jati* refers generally to a much smaller group [...] the English word caste is used to denote both [...] there is no real contradiction in this, for the word *jati* has a series of meanings, and by extension it is applied to what, according to traditional usage, should be designated as *varna*. (1965: 46)

Therefore, it seems that the messiness of the *varna-jati* distinctions have been made sense of within an understanding of the 'caste system', which is why Beteille goes on to define 'caste' in the next paragraph of his text (1965: 46). Dumont (1970: 72-75), while acknowledging the importance of the 'osmosis' between *varna* and *jati*, suggests that we might be better served if we were to understand the principles which give coherence to the structure of caste (also see Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 3-5). In a similar vein, MN Srinivas (1962, 1966) suggests that although there are discrepancies in practice between castes (*jatis*) and the ideology of *varna*, it is

within the caste/Hindu hierarchy (*varna*) that different castes (*jatis*) have sought to change their positions as a group (also see Sharma, Surendra, 1994; Charsley, 1998b).

When it comes to the context of self-representation and representation by others, however, it seems that there is no easy fit between *varna* and *jati*. Declan Quigley, along with Jonathan Parry, has indicated that while a caste might think of itself as *kshatriya*, they may be perceived by others as *sudra* (Quigley, 1994: 27-28). Others such as Rajni Kothari with Rushikesh Maru (1970), and Subrata Mitra (1994) have identified processes of consolidation of a corporate caste identity, one which may or may not correspond to neat *varna-jati* categorisations.

It is important to situate these processes in the context of dalit politics, which has sought to unite various *jatis* under a cohesive term of identification. Further, questions of self-representation, representation by others and the processes of consolidation of caste identity, have taken on grave significance in more recent dalit politics because, as Charsley (1998b: 70) has suggested, the ‘historic power’ of *jati* has been re-asserting itself. It is important therefore, to understand what gives cohesion to the categories of the caste system, *varna* order and its distinctions in terms of *jati*, especially in the context of dalit politics. I suggest that if we locate the theoretical moorings of anti-caste movements in the larger debate on the caste system, we may be able to shed light upon the current context of dalit politics.

## *The Caste System*

Barbosa is said to have identified three classes in the caste order: ‘the great lords, the knights and the fighting men [...], Bramenes, who are priests and the rulers of their houses of worship [...] and the untouchables’ (as quoted in Dirks, 2001: 19). It is suggested that the three classes had different customs from one another, that endogamy within caste units was a general custom, that sanctions were applied to maintain caste discipline and that the position of the *brahmin* was exalted and that of the ‘untouchables’ was inferior (Dirks, 2001: 19). DL Sheth provides a lot more detail. He suggests that Barbosa linked the idea of untouchability to ‘pollution’, that there were separations between the castes in terms of occupation and commensality (inter-dining) and that there was a relationship of caste with political organisation (1999: 2502).

While Sheth goes on to provide an account of the ‘secularisation of caste’ in the current context (1999: 2504-2508), he argues that although Barbosa did not offer a ‘systematic’ account of caste, the elements of caste he identified, ‘remain central to any definition of caste, even today’ (1999: 2502). Therefore, it seems that the features of caste that Barbosa identified, ‘as a hierarchy with brahmins at the top and “untouchables” at the bottom’, the principles of ‘pollution’ as being linked to ‘untouchability’, separation between castes by endogamy, occupation and commensality and the political organisation of castes, are necessary to understand the system of caste. However, Sheth seems to also suggest that, since Barbosa, there was a ‘second’ discovery of caste after British rule, which superimposed a scriptural varna view of caste as against Barbosa’s empirical view (1999: 2502).



The historian Nicholas Dirks, in his engaging study entitled 'Castes of Mind' (2001), makes a similar argument. He suggests that 'caste' as we know it now, is no ancient survival; it is a modern phenomenon, the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and British colonial rule:

It was under the British that "caste" became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today. (2001: 5)

In tracing this history, Dirks engages with a large number of interlocutors in the caste debate. Starting with Barbosa, he takes us through the colonial engagement with caste by officers of the East India company, colonial missionaries, ethnographers, administrators, historians and law-makers. He then traces the involvement of the radical and reform movements of the late 1800s to the early 1900s and thereafter the ethnographers and anthropologists of post-independent India. He argues that in the initial years of colonisation, the East India Company was more concerned with issues of land revenue and therefore, that 'the village' rather than 'caste' dominated the interests of colonial officials. Further, he notes that in the early years of the 1800s, the first extensive European account of caste was to come from a French Jesuit missionary, under the name of the Abbe Dubois (Dirks, 2001: 21-34). However, an important argument that Dirks makes, is that the text which was to influence much of writing on caste in India for the 'next 200 years' was William Jones' 1794 published translation of the *Laws of Manu (Manu Dharma Sastras)*:

Along with a text from the *Rg Veda* that gives a canonical origin story for the caste system [...] the *Manu* text has been trotted out for the last two hundred years as the classical statement of the caste system. It provides both an originary account of the four varnas, and an explanation, through the process of intermarriage and miscegenation, for the generation of the myriad actual caste groups, or *jatis*, reported by every ethnographer of Indian society. (2001: 35)

The *colonial* intervention with this text and the interventions thereafter, are highlighted by Dirks:

Whatever its historical status [...] most scholars today agree that it [Manu's Dharma Sastras] took on unprecedented status as an "applied" legal document only under early British rule. I would argue further that the canonic importance of this text for understanding the foundational nature of Indian society was an even more significant break with the past; it encapsulated British attempts to codify not just law but also social relations in a single, orthodox "Hindu" – and therefore necessarily "Brahmanic" – register. From Jones and Mill to Dumont and Marriott, *Manu* has taken on a general anthropological significance it could never have had before, with enormous consequences for the refashioning of basic assumptions about both religion and society. (2001: 34)

In delineating the impact of the text, Dirks suggests that 'the canonization of the text in colonial thought has both rendered caste by definition Brahmanic and opened the "Hindu" social world to charges [...] that caste society was under the exclusive domination of Brahmans...' (2001: 34-35).

Dirks' engagement with these particular arguments, as well as his methodology of study using colonial and post-colonial history, can be read, in part, as a reflection of his larger debate with Louis Dumont, whose work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) has been repeatedly avowed as highly influential and much criticised. The core of the disagreements between the two are between an understanding of the now-famous opposition between *status* and *power* in the context of caste relations (see especially, Sharma KL, 1994; Sharma, Surendra, 1994; Aloysius, 1997), its avowed implications for Indian 'civilisation', and the concomitant contrast it offers with western 'civilisation' (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994; Sharma, U, 2002).

### *Caste as Hierarchy*

Louis Dumont's work, as Dirks (2001) obliquely suggests, is framed in an orientalisng discourse: Dumont's interest in India's caste structure is in the large



part an interest in making the idea of hierarchy '*visible*'. It seems that Indian society is used as an example because it is seen as corresponding to this idea (Dumont, 1970: xvii). While setting out his understanding of hierarchy in India in terms of the subordination of power to status, he writes, 'thus one could almost say of our own society that it takes the opposite choice and subordinates status to power: it is egalitarian as far as ideology goes, and to a large extent puts power in the forefront...' (Dumont, 1970: 213).

Dumont arrives at his thesis about the subordination of power (politico-economic aspects) to status (ritual hierarchy) in the caste *structure* by first establishing an intricate set of distinctions between modern and traditional societies in terms of the individual (part) and her relations (whole). He then analyses Celestin Bougle's understanding of the caste system<sup>5</sup> to suggest that the 'principles' underlying Bougle's analysis are reducible to a single 'true principle':

[...] the opposition between the pure and the impure. This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because the pure and the impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. *The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.* (1970: 43, emphasis in original)

Therefore, Dumont takes the various 'characteristics' of caste: division of labour, separation in terms of, for instance, commensality (inter-dining) and connubiality (inter-marriage), and a hierarchical division between different castes, as being determined by the superordination of the value of purity over impurity. Therefore, he

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<sup>5</sup> 'According to him [Bougle], the caste system is composed of hereditary groups [...] which are both distinguished from one another and connected together in three ways:

(1) by gradation of status or hierarchy;  
(2) by detailed rules aimed at ensuring their separation;  
(3) by division of labour and the interdependence which results from it'. (Dumont, 1970: 43)



specifically engages with the principle of purity and impurity to prove its salience in relation to division of labour, endogamy and rules concerning contact and food.

In a sense, Dumont engages with the four-fold *varna* system to suggest that the principle of the pure and the impure, with the *brahmins* and the 'untouchables' at two ends of the respective spectrum, give an organic coherence to the structure of caste. The 'middle zone' of caste, associated with (secular) power (politico-economic rank), he suggests, is in the end subordinate to the ritual status of the *brahmin* and the principle of hierarchy (religion):

[...] power exists in the society, and the Brahman who thinks in terms of hierarchy knows this perfectly well; yet hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such, without contradicting its own principle. Therefore it must give place to power without saying so, and it is obliged to close its eyes to this point on pain of destroying itself. In other words, once the king is made subordinate to the priest, as the very existence of hierarchy presupposes, it must give him a place after the priest, and before the others, unless it is absolutely to deny his dignity and the usefulness of his function. (1970: 77)

This, he suggests, is done through the relationship between law and *dharma* - while the king governs, the *brahmin* rules from on high, through *brahminic* wisdom. Further:

[...] power in some way counterbalances purity at *secondary levels*, while remaining subordinate to it at the *primary or non-segmented level*. (1970: 77, 78, emphasis in original)

Dumont's theory is further unravelled through his understanding of power and the 'problem of economics'. He argues that an understanding of the politico-economic domain as power finds a resonance in the Indian context through the notion of *artha*:

But the main characteristics of this society, like many other traditional societies, is that the two aspects [wealth and political power] are bound together in the same phenomenon, no distinction being made between them. One can say that just as religion in a way encompasses politics, so politics encompasses economics within itself. The difference [in Indian 'traditional' society?] is that the politico-economic domain is separated, named, in a subordinate position as against religion, whilst economics remains undifferentiated within politics. (1970: 165)

Criticisms against Dumont's theory of caste abound in the literature<sup>6</sup>. The charges against Dumont, amongst many, are that he denies India a *history* and a *politics* (Dirks, 2001; Sharma, U, 2002; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994). Another argument is that Dumont's structural understanding of caste is one seen from the perspective of a *brahmin*, with the implication that it excludes other perspectives:

It is a view which conforms rather closely to the high-caste ideal of what the caste system of Hindu India ought to be like according to those who value it positively; it conforms well to the theory of caste purveyed in learned Brahmanical tracts. (Berreman, as quoted in Sharma, U, 1994: 78)

Dirks suggests that such an understanding, which is replicated by much of the writing on caste, is a direct descendant of the orientalist vision maintained by colonialism:

This was a vision of India in which religion transcended politics, society resisted change, and the state awaited its virgin birth in the late colonial era. Thus caste has become the modernist apparition of India's traditional self. Under colonial rule, caste – now defined by the dharmic ideal of varna, disembodied from its former political contexts, and available as the principal object of colonial knowledge – could take on a new and different form. In this dissociated form it was appropriated, and reconstructed, by British rule [...It was made out to be] far more pervasive, far more totalizing [...] than it had ever been before, and at the same time [...] it was defined as a fundamentally religious order [...] What anthropology and Indology together have done most successfully in the post-colonial context has been to assert the precolonial authority of a specifically colonial form of power and representation, [...] disguising the history of colonialism and the essentially contingent and political character of caste... (2001: 60, 13)

Dirks goes on to establish the fallacy of Dumont's subordination of power to status, by examining the political nature of caste through an understanding of the displacement of the king as a repository of politics in the alignments of caste relations. The argument that he makes is that 'caste had always been political – it had been shaped in fundamental ways by political struggles and processes' while

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<sup>6</sup> For some incisive critiques see Quigley (1994), Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma (1994), Sharma, KL (1994a, 1994b), Sharma, Surendra (1994), Sharma, U (1994, 2002), Unnithan-Kumar (1997), Dirks (2001).



suggesting that 'it was not a designation that exhausted the totality of Indian social forms, let alone described their essence' (2001: 13).

Ursula Sharma and Mary Searle-Chatterjee also offer very important critiques of Dumont based on the epistemological underpinnings of his theory and his methodology. While critiquing the oppositions he sets up between the individualistic and the holistic, as well as the traditional and the modern, they argue that Dumont 'confuses two separate ideas; distinctiveness (which is a logical concept) and typicality (which is a statistical or empirical concept). He regarded what was saliently different about Indian society from a western point of view (caste, purity and pollution concepts, etc) as equivalent to what was typical of or central to it' (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 4-6). Therefore, they suggest that while Dumont was cautious about essentialising the nature of caste, he proceeded to essentialise the nature of Hindu society; so 'dynamic processes were said to animate the whole, but they were self-generating and continuous over time, relatively insulated from outside forces' (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 4).

In contrast to Dumont's single 'true' principle of the caste hierarchy, Sharma and Searle-Chatterjee offer other frames of analysis to understand power and status-formation, and consequently notions of in/equality. Honour, family solidarity and the sociology of envy are related concepts that they offer, along with Dumont's notions of pollution and purity, that go into the determination of status (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 12-14).



Further, in contrast to Dumont's understanding of caste as a cohesive, organic hierarchy, stands the literature that seeks to understand the 'structure of caste as mystification' (Charsley, 1998b: 56), to be de-mystified. Therefore, in opposition to an understanding of caste as hierarchy, where notions of inequality and equality seem irrelevant because of the cohesiveness of the hierarchy, there is a vast body of literature that seeks to locate the recognition by 'lower' caste communities that the hierarchy is *not* organic and that there are conceptions of freedom and equality amongst them.

'Untouchable' concepts of personhood and equality (Freeman, 1993; Vincentnathan, 1993), subaltern consciousness amongst caste communities (Chatterjee, P, 1989), competition amongst caste communities (Kothari and Maru 1970; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994), the use of myths by dalit communities to explain the origins of caste system (Deliege, 1994) are just some of the ways in which a vast body of literature locates the resistance by dalit communities to the notion of hierarchy.

Gerald Berreman is one of the anthropologists who figures prominently amongst the theorists who have opposed a structural understanding of caste. It is suggested that he looked for an oppositional consciousness amongst 'lower' caste communities (Charsley, 1998b: 56) and that he examined caste relations as an exercise of power (Sharma, U, 1994; 2002), as against an understanding of an *organic* hierarchy. Further, as I have suggested earlier, understandings of caste as ritual hierarchy/structure also stand in contrast to understandings of caste as process and caste as identity (Sharma, U, 1994, 2002; Unnithan, 1994; Dhareshwar, 1995a;

Unnithan-Kumar, 1997), where caste *relations*, in terms of a process of contestation, re-formulation and negotiation of (*dalit*) identity take predominance.

The significance of Dumont's analysis is in the framework he provides for a separation of the economic, political and cultural aspects of caste-life. While the subordination of power to status in his framework is problematic, it allows for the argument that if the structure of caste has to be transformed, it is ritual hierarchy that has to be dismantled. Within Dumont's trope, however, the cohesiveness of the caste structure is ensured by the ways in which the individual is encompassed by the whole. He does not, therefore, account for the possibilities of a *politics within* the frame of the caste structure. By his relegation of 'discrepancies' in the caste structure to surface differences, as opposed to deep structure, he allows for a suffocating immortality of caste.

Dirks has suggested that Ambedkar and Gandhi shared a basically ritualistic understanding of caste; that they had a fundamentally anthropological view on caste (2001: 273, 278). Is it then possible to make certain distinctions between the theories of Dumont, Ambedkar and Gandhi, if they continue to inform writings on caste and dalit politics respectively? In this part, I will suggest that while Dumont understood caste as an essentially Indian and Hindu hierarchy, Ambedkar's interest was not necessarily in exposing the essentially Indian nature of caste, but in articulating the injustice of the caste hierarchy. While the similarities between Dumont and Ambedkar are in the analysis that caste is intrinsically linked to Hinduism, they part ways once again when it comes to an analysis of a 'consciousness of kind' amongst dominant and dalit communities in the caste/Hindu hierarchy. Ambedkar is emphatic



in rejecting such a consciousness of kind within the hierarchy. Further, while Hinduism/religion was the defining trope, Ambedkar sought to *politicise* caste and also to engender justice through economic analyses (Galanter, 1984; Omvedt, 1994; Baxi, 1995; Thorat, S, 1996; Aloysius, 1997; Rodrigues, 2002). On the other hand, Gandhi sought to relegate caste to the realm of the 'social' and away from the 'political' (Aloysius, 1997), by arguing that caste and untouchability were corruptions of the ideal *varna* society, which according to him, was an organic whole (and not a hierarchy, unlike Dumont and Ambedkar's analyses).

### *Ambedkar and Gandhi: Caste and Hinduism*

While the Poona Pact has been taken to be the apotheosis of the conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi<sup>7</sup>, another conflict which has also received attention is a debate between the nature of caste society and its relation to Hinduism after the Pact was signed in 1932. In 1936, Ambedkar prepared a speech for a conference of the *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal* which was not delivered because the conference felt that the views expressed in the speech provokingly entitled, 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936a), would be unbearable to them. This instigated a series of public debates between Ambedkar and Gandhi (and the Mandal) about the nature of Hindu society and the caste structure.

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<sup>7</sup> The Poona Pact was signed in 1932 as a 'resolution' to the bitter conflict on the modes of representation for the 'depressed classes'. Ambedkar, speaking for the depressed classes advocated for separate electorates so that dalit communities would have adequate representation. On the other hand, Gandhi, also claiming to represent the depressed classes, was in favour of joint electorates, as he perceived that the separate electorates would create divisions within the 'Hindu' community. When Ramsay Mc Donald passed the 'Communal Award' in 1932 that granted separate electorates to the depressed classes, Gandhi went on a fast unto death for the revocation of grant of separate electorates to 'untouchable' communities. After 21 days, the Poona Pact was signed which granted reserved *seats* for the depressed classes; therefore the candidates were reserved, whereas the constituency that voted was general (Galanter, 1984: 29-34; also see Omvedt, 1994).



In the speech (1936a: 23-74), Ambedkar argues forcefully that there are intimate links between the caste system and Hinduism. Locating his argument in the separation of 'political' reform from 'social' reform in the policies of the National Congress, he argues that 'political-minded Hindus' are not fit for political power without social reform, in terms of a reorganisation and reconstruction of Hinduism. Arguing that a political revolution can only follow a social revolution, Ambedkar then addresses the socialists, suggesting that neither can there be economic reform without a reform of the social order. He poses the question of the 'unity' of the proletariat suggesting that the socialists' disbelief in caste will not suffice in bringing about a revolution.

Ambedkar then tackles the defenders of the caste system. He takes on the argument that caste is merely a division of labour, and that it is a necessary feature of every society. This is where Ambedkar famously argues that caste is not a division of labour but a division of labourers. There is, he suggests, a graded hierarchy of labourers through a stratification of occupation. The occupations that people have are not determined by skills or capacity, they are determined by the social status of their parents. The caste system therefore is based on the 'dogma of predestination' (1936a: 35-36).

Turning his critique to the Hindu order, he suggests that the conception of Hindu society is a myth. All it is, he suggests, is a collection of castes, each of which dines among itself, marries among itself and even prescribes its own dress. He denies the existence of any kind of 'consciousness of kind' amongst the caste structure. He suggests instead that the only consciousness there is, is a consciousness of each

person's caste. Taking on the Arya Samajists who advocate a version of the *chaturvarnya* (four-fold hierarchy) based not on birth but on worth, he argues that to dissociate the 'idealised' *chaturvarnya* from the 'caste system' is next to impossible, because of the meanings that the *varna* order have come to take on (1936a: 37-74).

Arguing for an annihilation of caste through inter-marriage, he mounts a scathing critique of Hinduism, by suggesting that the caste order found in other religions is of a different order, because unlike in Hinduism, it does not exist as a religious dogma. He further suggests that Hinduism does not contain universal principles, it only contains a set of discriminatory rules (1936a: 37-74).

In his defence of Hinduism, Gandhi makes a distinction between untouchability, the caste system and *varnashramadharma*. He argues:

Caste has nothing to do with religion [...] Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each of us to earn our bread by answering our ancestral calling [...] The callings of a Brahmin - spiritual teacher - and a scavenger are equal, and their due merit carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward for man [...] Indeed one traces even now in the villages the faint lines of this healthy operation of law [...] And there is nothing in the law of Varna to warrant a belief in untouchability. (Gandhi, 1936: 77, 78)

Therefore, Gandhi argues against an understanding of a hierarchy in the *varna* order. He dissociates caste from the Hindu religion and upholds the law of *varna*. For him, *varna* is an ideal, and the ideal is seen in operation (in some villages). Further, the ideal can be separated from its corruption by caste and untouchability. Still further, he interprets Hinduism in terms of its essence, *ahimsa* and 'one and only God as Truth'. However, when the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal (Gandhi, 1936: 79-80) wrote to Gandhi saying that they found it difficult to understand how one might separate caste from the *varna* order of Hinduism (found in the *sastras*), he replied that if they were

interchangeable terms and if they were to be found in the *sastras*, then he would cease to be a Hindu. The underlying argument that Gandhi made was that there *was* a distinction between *varna* and caste.

In his reply to Gandhi, Ambedkar (1936b: 81-92) continued to suggest that the caste system/*varna* order were integral to Hinduism. He seized on the purported distinction made by Gandhi between caste and *varna* to suggest that in Gandhi's conception of *varna* as the duty of answering 'ancestral calling', there was, in fact, no distinction to make with caste. Taking on Gandhi's own choice of professions, he suggested that Gandhi had strayed from his ancestral calling.

This debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar in terms of the centrality of Hinduism, has been understood variously by dalit groups and academics. While there have been several scholars who have attempted to talk about the caste system in terms of Christianity and Islam (Japhet, 1997; Webster, 1999; Sikand, 2003), Hinduism, whether understood in terms of feudal backwardness or *brahminical* patriarchy (Omvedt, 1995), continues to inform dalit politics.

While Hinduism is one of the central tropes in the debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi, this debate is also about the nature of division of labour in caste society. The debate on the division of labour, with the overarching trope of *status* is reminiscent of Dumont's framework. Still further, it lies at the heart of the relation between caste and class.



## Caste, Class and the City

In this section I shall review the literature on caste and class, and caste and the city<sup>8</sup>, to suggest that there is an intricately connected web of relations between caste, class and the space of the city. While the *protean* nature of caste in the city sits side-by-side with the understandings of the city as a space of change, this change is sometimes conceptualised in terms of the erosion of the ‘ritual status’ of caste, leaving behind the residue of *economic* organisation. DL Sheth writes:

As may be expected, such erosion [of ritual status] has taken place to a much greater extent and degree in the urban areas and at the macro-system level of social stratification [...] in the villages, too, traditional social relationships are being redefined in economic terms [...] from the kind of social-religious system the Indian village was, it is increasingly becoming primarily an economic organisation. (1999: 2505)

While Sheth is wary of drawing binary oppositions between city space and the village, his understanding of the ‘secularisation of caste’ is framed by a particular conception of urban space as more *conducive* to change, as well as an understanding about the nature of caste. However, a split between ‘traditional’ and ‘secular’ forms of organisation, as a split between ritual hierarchy and economic differentiation, are at the heart of Sheth’s understanding of the ‘secularisation’ of caste.

The understanding of caste and class in terms of a split between culture and economics, seems to be echoed in other understandings of caste and class. This seems to resonate in the history of the caste-class debates in India, conceptually as well as the ways in which it is reflected in the dalit-class struggles of the radical movements before and after independence. In this section, I analyse the literature to

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<sup>8</sup> ‘The city’ is not a single monolith and India has a long history of cities of different types. While I site my research in the modern city of Bangalore by discussing its specific history (see Chapter Four), in this instance, I am using ‘the city’ as a concept distinguished from an understanding of ‘the village’, which I shall discuss in some detail in this section.

sift through the meanings of caste and class and the relations between the two that dominate the literature.

### *Caste and Class*

In their introduction to *Contextualising Caste* (1994), Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula Sharma seem to suggest that the demarcations between ‘culture’ and ‘economics’ correspond to those between caste and class in India; ‘whereas in the western context, [class] has been very largely the study of class “cultures”, [in the Indian context, it] seems to have been treated as a culturally “empty” category’ (1994: 18). In a recent article, Rudolf Heredia gives concrete voice to this argument when he proposes that the confusion between caste and class is one between the different dimensions of institutionalised inequality: caste, in which ‘religious, ritual and cultural values are prominent’ and class, in which ‘the political-economic dimension of social stratification’ are crucial (2000: 45).

In his preface to a recent edition of the sociological journal ‘Contributions to Indian Sociology’, Jonathan Parry talks of a disjunction:

If the problem with much of the sociology of India has been its rather one-sided preoccupation with representations and values, and with caste, kinship and ritual, the problem with the study of labour has been an almost equally one-sided preoccupation with interests, with instrumental or ‘practical’ reason, its want of ‘thick description’ and its ‘black-box’ treatment of culture. (1999: ix)

There are many instances of such disjunction, both historically as well as conceptually. Gail Omvedt (1994, 1995) has indicated the ways in which the left, through the years of pre-independence, isolated dalit politics. She provides an account of the collusion of the left with Gandhian forces in a programme for ‘harijan upliftment’ while ‘perhaps’ assigning to themselves an identity as ‘Hindu atheists’:



The new left intelligensia [...] young Indian socialists and communists led militant struggles that attracted large sections of the exploited and gave them a vision of an equalitarian society, but they avoided the recognition of caste and stressed a mechanical class framework that sought to override traditional identities rather than reinterpret them [...] In the 1920s [...] the communists put forward a universalistic ideology [...] which] did not recognize community/caste as a node of exploitation; it threw all non-class categories into the realm of the superstructure, relegated to secondary consequences since they were only cultural/ideological constructs. *The formation of class ideology of this type created a caste ideology of a specific type in reaction*, one which set up caste in opposition to class as a cultural/social factor, a non-economic factor. (Omvedt, 1995: 40, 41; emphasis in original)

Nicholas Dirks and Vivek Dhareshwar talk about the ‘embarrassment of caste’ (Dirks, 2001: 290-296) as well as the moral distaste in talking about caste, especially for secular liberals and leftists (Dhareshwar, 1995a: 119). They analyse this in relation to the avowed ‘communal’ nature of caste. The relegation of caste to the ‘private’ domain, either through understandings of ‘compartmentalisation’<sup>9</sup> (Dirks, 2001: 291) or in relation to the colonial encounter (Dhareshwar, 1995a: 118) has with it, they suggest, a sub-text which implies that any other mode of speaking about caste is ‘casteist’.

Therefore, when Omvedt suggests that the communists of pre-independence India ‘perhaps’ thought of themselves as ‘atheist’ and secular, she is also talking about the ways in which their self-identification obscured their relegation of their caste identities to the ‘private’ domain and out of public scrutiny. This understanding of the relegation of caste identity to the ‘private’ domain is a recurrent theme in some of the literature on caste in the context of urban space, and is understood sometimes in terms of ethnicisation (Dirks, 2001).

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<sup>9</sup> Dirks uses this concept of MN Srinivas, to explain ‘the capacity to situate caste solely within the domestic sphere, the home, frequently as a matter of fashion and family’ (Dirks, 2001: 291).



Returning to the issue of 'caste and class', Omvedt (1993: 48-61) suggests that the question of the distinctions and similarities between caste and class were to crop up in the context of more recent dalit politics as well. In her analysis of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, for instance, she suggests that there were bitter contestations between the 'cultural' and 'economic' aspects of oppression; which, she suggests was posited as one between Ambedkar and Marx:

Themes of 'class' versus 'caste', the 'economic' versus the 'social' ranged through all the dalit demonstrations and discussions [...] But generally arguments seemed to take place in a stereotypical fashion, in which dalits (and many socialists) rejected the economic interpretation of history by arguing for the centrality of the cultural, social and religious factors. Superficially, the 'Marxist' position was by far the most reasonable, since its spokesmen never remained at the level of traditional Marxism but spoke of 'combining caste struggle' and 'uniting all the oppressed'. The Ambedkarites could have argued that Ambedkar himself had put forward the first 'class-caste' line, but instead their position seemed almost casteist. *Tuza bap kon? Ambedkar kiva Marx?* was the popular challenge hurled at leftist dalit youth by anti-Communists: 'Who is your father, - Ambedkar or Marx?' (1993: 53-54)

Omvedt herself, attempts to resolve the caste-class distinctions by calling for a historical materialism in the study of caste (1994). However, an understanding of the 'communal' nature of caste politics, in terms of a demarcation of caste politics as identity politics; as well as the inadequacy of 'class' struggles, continues to haunt the caste-class movements in post-independence India (Patil, 1994). In the December of 2003, when a dalit feminist group sought to celebrate Ambedkar-Divas day as 'women's liberation day', there were protests from a group of left feminists who decried it as an engagement with 'identity' politics (Pramilani, 2003).

The tension between the two camps, as has been suggested, revolves around an understanding of 'materiality' as against 'cultural' construction. Ramakrishna Mukherjee (1999) elucidates this distinction between 'materiality' and 'culture' from the perspective of the left. In his article entitled, 'Caste in Itself, Caste and Class, or

Caste in Class' (1999), he contrasts Weber's understanding of caste with that of Marx, to suggest that Weber misconceived caste as '*brahmin* theodicy' (by referring only to the *varna* order). Further, he argues that this misconception was taken to Olympian heights by Dumont in his analysis of the uniqueness of caste in India. Mukherjee also suggests that there is an anathema amongst theorists (such as MN Srinivas) to talk about Indian society in class terms. He argues that Srinivas, with his conception of 'dominant caste'<sup>10</sup>, forcibly funnelled class into an amorphous identity. He further argues that even though 'caste and class became a catchy formulation' (with Beteille), its ideological ('cultural') commitment meant that it soon merged into a formulation of caste in itself. Instead, he suggests that in India today, 'caste in class' depicts reality. Caste is, according to him, in the process of withering away along with the march of history and at most, caste might remain as an atavism, and the distinctions between caste communities would be like the distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles or that between Hindus and Muslims (Mukherjee, 1999).

However, the 'ritual', 'cultural' character of the division of labour/occupational hierarchy continues to rear its ugly head in the literature. Leela Dube (1996), for example, argues that there are significant continuities in the link between caste and occupation:

Agriculture - although now open to all castes - still gives a distinct identity to a large number of 'traditional' cultivators. Equally, some other occupations remain the exclusive privilege of particular castes. A Brahmin, for instance, still performs the functions of the purohit (priest), for upper and middle level castes. Among artisan castes of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters and weavers, a few members of the group at the very least are imparted the necessary skills, and make a living by the traditional craft. Finally, most ritually polluting occupations – the curing and tanning of hides, the removal of dead animals, scavenging, and the activities of the barber, the washerman, and the midwife – retain their association with specific castes. (1996: 2, 3)

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<sup>10</sup> MN Srinivas has identified several characteristics for a caste to be dominant: it should own a sizeable amount of the arable land locally available, have strength in numbers and occupy a high place in the local hierarchy. Apart from these factors, he identifies, western education, urban sources of income and jobs in administration as determining their dominant status (1966: 10-11).



Declan Quigley (1994) on the other hand, discards the theory that there is a connection between caste and occupation which explains how the caste system works. He argues that there are no neat coincidences to be found between castes and the occupations that they are supposed to undertake. He suggests that there are two reasons for this: 'the first is that it is never the case that *all* members of a given caste perform a particular occupation [...] and the second reason is that many people who perform the same occupation belong to quite distinct castes' (Quigley, 1994: 29-31). However, Quigley's argument is not for the separation of the ritual from the economic to explain the functioning of caste.

In his chapter on 'Conceptualisation of Caste-Class Nexus' (2001: 42-43) KL Sharma contextualises the caste-class debate by arguing that one of the extreme viewpoints expressed about caste and class has been that caste represents ideational and normative aspects, whereas class refers to basic economic relations. In an earlier essay (1994), he lays out several misconceptions on the study of caste and class in India:

Caste and class are polar opposites; caste is being replaced by class; caste is a rural phenomenon whereas class is found in urban-industrial settings; caste is an ascriptive system while class is based on the achievement principle; caste is a closed system and does not permit mobility for its members whereas class is an open system, hence a 'caste model' for studying Indian society and the West has/had classes, hence a 'class model' for studying western societies. (Sharma, KL, 1994: 50)

In an effort to draw organic links between caste and class, he suggests that we need to conceive of caste in terms of the long history of anti-caste struggles, which he argues are a 'testimony not only of structural and ideational changes, but also of the accretions, alterations and withdrawals in the caste system' (Sharma, KL, 1994a: 4). Arguing that the caste system has never been uniformly rigid/flexible in different



parts of India, he suggests that in the past, other factors such as the quality of agricultural land, infrastructure for cultivation, trade and commerce, invasions and migrations determined social status and mobility. In the current context, he suggests that criteria that indicate a changing status-determination and 'caste-class nexus' are education, style of life, ownership, control and use of land, inter-caste feuds, competition and bargaining for higher wages (1994a: 4).

In arguing for an understanding of the nexus between the two, KL Sharma suggests that the two are inseparable from each other, 'Both are conceptual constructs as well as empiric phenomena. Thus, caste and class represent, to a large extent, though from different angles, the same social reality. Classes function within the contexts of castes. Caste conflicts are also class or agrarian conflicts' (2001: 42-43).

The conflict and the nexus between caste and class seems to find rupture as well as cohesion in the category of 'backward classes'<sup>11</sup> that are entitled to preferences in the Constitution of India (see Galanter, 1984; Beteille, 1992). The question of who the term refers to has vexed the Indian judiciary for a considerable number of years, especially in terms of the criteria to be applied in assessing 'backwardness'. Marc Galanter (1984) traces the judicial discourse on backwardness as being assessed in terms of educational backwardness, social backwardness, cumulative backwardness, as well as through the use of criteria such as under-representation and geographical location. Therefore, the ways in which the category has been employed and

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<sup>11</sup> Galanter writes, 'The Constitution names as the permissible recipients of preferences, not backward individuals or families, not backward castes, religious communities, occupational or regional groups, but backward "classes" of citizens' (1984: 189).

understood, points to the difficulty in neatly separating the categories of caste and class.

In this section, I have indicated that although there have been several attempts to integrate caste and class, there continues to be a disjunction between caste and class in articulating particular forms of injustice. I locate myself with the literature that suggests that culture and economics are *equally* important in analysing caste *and* class. However, I argue that in order to account for the continuing disjunction between caste and class, we have to provide a framework for an integrated analysis of caste and class. Therefore, one of the purposes of this research is to locate ways in which we can integrate caste and class for a cohesive politics for slum (and) dalit communities in Bangalore.

### ***Caste and the City***

In this section, I shall draw on the literature to make the argument that the ‘urban context’, the space of the city, has been understood as a space where protean forms of caste continue to operate. One of the ways in which this operation has been understood is in terms of a compartmentalisation of caste, which is understood in terms of a division between the public ‘secular’ space and the family as a ‘private’ space for continuing caste (as cultural difference) practices. Another understanding, which is quite distinct from the first, is that caste no longer holds sway in urban spaces: that it is familial ties that determine differences in status in the city. Further, there has been a construction of the village as representing the cosmos of Indian society. This, I suggest, provides a context to the real and imagined constructs of the ‘village’ and the ‘city’ in the dalit imaginary.



Nicholas Dirks has argued that in the early years of colonisation, it was the village community that obsessed the colonial imagination, connected as this was to revenue collection. The construction of the village community as a self-sufficient, cohesive 'little republic' (also see Jodhka, 2002) has been traced to people such as Thomas Munro, Mark Wilks and Charles Metcalfe, who Dirks suggests, wrote eloquently about the importance of the village community. In Metcalfe's famous words:

The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations [...] Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution; [...] but the village community remains the same. (as quoted in Dirks, 2001: 28)

While the interest in the 'cohesion and autonomy of the village republic' was to be replaced by an interest in the system of caste on the part of the colonial administrators, Dirks argues that McKim Marriott in 1955 (in the wake of the post-war years, when America took on a new imperialist role), edited a volume of essays entitled 'Village India' wherein he sought to establish the 'fundamental relationship between caste as a civilizational idea and the village' (2001: 54). Jodhka elaborates on the interest of academics of caste (such as MN Srinivas and Andre Beteille) in the village. He argues:

The village has for long been viewed as a convenient entry point for understanding 'traditional' societies. It has long been seen as a signifier of the authentic native life, a social and cultural unit uncorrupted by outside influence. For the professional sociologists and sociological anthropologists, village represented India in microcosm, 'an invaluable observation centre' where one could see the 'real' India, its social organisation and cultural life [...] Apart from its methodological value, it being a representative unit of Indian society, village has also been an important ideological category in the modern Indian imagination. The 'village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation'. (Jodhka, 2002)

This is again emphasised by DL Sheth who argues that:



In the latter ethnographic studies of caste carried out by Indian sociologists, although the varna theory was discarded, caste continued to be seen as a vertical hierarchy of ritual statuses embedded in the religious and cultural context of the village. (1999: 250)

While on the one hand, the village has been understood as a representation of the cosmos of Indian 'civilisation', on the other, it has been repeatedly argued that amongst the upper castes in the city, caste is no longer a basis for identification. Relations of the family are understood as superseding identification based on caste. A related argument is that caste is 'only a significant determinant of behaviour at the point of marriage' (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 17). This argument is made specifically in the urban context, where restrictions on eating and drinking and touching are understood as being rendered meaningless (also see Dube, 1996). The point emphasised here is that it is the family that reproduces inequality, rather than caste.

Therefore, Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma write that in the middle class strata, 'the cultural and social capital to be generated through appeal to caste and similar 'primordial' solidarities are seen as less valuable than those which can be accumulated by other means (education, professional solidarity, links with groups outside India, etc)' (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 17, 18).

While the family and other forms of identification have been understood as replacing caste, there is another theory that suggests that caste is being compartmentalised. Aditya Nigam (2000) talks of the study of Lucknow rickshawallas by Gould who found that all the persons in his sample adhered fairly strictly to the norms of endogamy. There seems to have been a division between the 'private' and the 'public' spaces, because Gould argues that they dined with members of their own

caste groups 'under domestic conditions' while breaking commensal rules during working hours. Nigam argues that such a compartmentalisation of the home, the family, as against the workplace, probably allows for the continuance of practices such as untouchability in the domain of the family; and that they seem perfectly compatible with modernisation<sup>12</sup>.

While Nigam locates the continuing *violence* of caste in the city in the domain of the family, Dirks draws attention to the *politicised* violence of caste in the urban context. Referring to the aftermath of VP Singh's announcement to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report<sup>13</sup>, when city after city was hit by riots and self-immolations, Dirks argues:

The sociological assurance that caste would disappear except as a form of domestic ritual or familial identity when it entered the city and new domains of industrial capital turned out to be a bourgeois dream disrupted both by steady reports of escalating violence in the countryside and then the turmoil over reservations in the principal cities of the nation. (Dirks, 2001: 16; 291)

There are several ways therefore, that caste relations have been conceived of in the context of urban space. One of them has been to understand the space of the city as more conducive to conceiving caste relations as *class* relations. Another has been to suggest that caste is no longer relevant in the space of the city. In some conceptions, when caste is understood as domestic ritual in urban space, it is understood in terms of *cultural difference* and not as *ritual hierarchy*. Nigam on the other hand, points to

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<sup>12</sup> Aditya Nigam's specific interest is in locating a dalit critique of modernity. In doing so, he is also engaging in a public debate on the issue which has seen several interlocutors, with differing perspectives (see Geetha, V, 2001; Nanda, M, 2001; Pandian, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> The Mandal Commission report recommended 27 per cent reservation in government service for 'socially and economically backward classes'. The decision to implement the recommendations of the report in 1990 by the then Prime Minister, VP Singh sparked off a series of violent riots amongst the upper caste student population, where the methods of protest ranged from street cleaning, boot polishing to self-immolation (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999: 499-503; also see Srinivas, MN, 1996; Rao, 1999; 2003a).



the *violence* of caste within the domain of the family, when he indicates that practices of untouchability continue to operate in the city in familial contexts. Nicholas Dirks however, points to the violent politically contested nature of caste relations not just in the countryside, but in the spaces of the cities of India. However, there seems to be a gap in accounting for the nature of caste relations in urban spaces from the perspective of dalit communities. In the next section, I shall examine the ways in which dalit politics has conceived of rural and urban spaces to locate a dalit critique of urban spaces.

### *The Village and City in the Dalit Imaginary*

Surinder Jodhka has contrasted the images of rural India in Gandhi, Ambedkar and Nehru (2002). He argues that Gandhi has been rightly known as the ideologue of the village. Tracing the three ways in which Gandhi used the idea of the village, Jodhka suggests that in the first, Gandhi used the village to establish equivalence with western societies. In the second, he counter-posed the village and the city and presented the village as a critique of, and an alternative to, modern, western culture. In the third, he was concerned with reforming the villages. The village as a site of authenticity, the real/pure India, was contrasted to the city, corrupted by western influence and understood as totally western (Jodhka, 2002).

In sharp contrast, however, stands Ambedkar's scathing critique of the 'village republic' as an idealised form of social organisation. In the aftermath of the constituent assembly debates on the village as the constitutional base for autonomous, administrative units in India, he uncovered the 'cohesiveness' of the village by laying bare the prohibitions, the duties, as well as the servility visited upon



the 'untouchables'. He suggested instead that one could see the functioning of the Hindu social order in operation in 'full swing' in the Hindu village (1948c: 323-331).

As Jodhka has argued (2002), Ambedkar, like most of his contemporaries, talked about the village in civilisational terms. However, Jodkha suggests that, unlike others, Ambedkar saw the Indian civilisation in terms of Hindu civilisation, and therefore, his conception of the village was as a Hindu village, divided into two sets of populations: 'touchables' who lived inside the village and 'untouchables' who lived outside the village. His lasting remark, 'I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India [...] What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?' (as quoted in Jodkha, 2002), finds a resonance in much more recent dalit history. Written in the context of JRD Tata's comments about the over-crowding in his beloved Bombay because of the 'exodus from the countryside', the editorial in Dalit Voice in 1983 is vitriolic:

[...] does Tata know why dalits are making a beeline for the cities? Being mostly landless agricultural labourers, they find it impossible to live in the villages [...] On one side starvation, but more than that their very life, their little property and the honour of their women are in danger [...] There are one hundred and one reasons why the Dalits prefer the city. It may be an animal existence, miserable in the congested, dirty slums, but in the villages even the very existence of the Dalits is threatened [...] we have long been advocating the shifting of Dalit population to bigger cities. We call upon Dalit organizations and leaders to take up this work seriously and make it an organized mass migration [...] Dr Ambedkar had spoken about India's stinking 'village republics' – the cesspool of caste politics. Where Hindus are in brute majority, Dalits have no salvation. (as quoted in Joshi, 1986: 70)

Aditya Nigam, in his essay on the epistemology of the dalit critique of modernity (2000), also locates, amongst other things, the social space of the city as the place of freedom for dalit communities:

The motifs are all there and clear. The language of rights, the spread of modern scientific education, the emergence of the secular urban space, the ideas of liberty, freedom, equality – all situated in the city. These are recurring themes. (Nigam, 2000)

However, Nigam, with Kancha Iliah's understanding of dalit modernity also locates the shattering of the dream of the city because, 'it was in the cities that the nexus between the twice-born castes (*brahmins* and *baniyas*) was consolidated' (as quoted in Nigam, 2000). The larger argument that Nigam makes is that:

If we look at the ways in which routinely, everyday discourse is marked, even in the cities, by the languages of caste, religion and the like, we would be compelled to acknowledge that there is a great deal of truth in the dalit critique that the braminical castes have taken over our public institutions and colonised the public sphere. (Nigam, 2000)

In this section, I have examined the literature on dalit politics and the city to locate the ways in which we can account for a dalit critique of urban spaces. In the dalit imaginary, there has been a powerful equation of the city with caste-free lives. Dalit theorists such as Kancha Iliah, on the other hand, talk of the shattering of the dream of the city in the dalit imagination. In locating this critique, Nigam argues that it is in the public sphere (of the city) that the colonisation and consolidation of dominant castes have taken place.

In Nigam's conception of caste relations in the city, there seems to be a separation of the 'public' and 'private' domains of caste relations. While he locates the violence of untouchability in the 'private' domain of the family, he also locates the colonisation of the 'public' sphere by dominant caste communities. I suggest that this separation exists in Nigam's account because of the centrality given to the domain of the family in accounting for caste relations in the city. It is also because the question of access to 'public' spaces has been highly politicised by dalit politics. In this thesis, I locate myself along with Nigam in interrogating caste relations in the space of the city, while questioning the 'private' nature of the practices of untouchability.



### *Caste, Class and the City*

So far, I have reviewed the literature to indicate that there has been a disjunction between the 'cultural' and the 'economic' in the analysis of 'caste' and 'class'. I have also indicated that there is a gap in accounting for caste relations in urban spaces, from the perspective of dalit communities. Further, I have indicated that within dalit politics, there is a conception of city space as liberatory and caste-free. This understanding, however, sits uneasily with a conception of the consolidation of dominant caste communities in urban spaces. Having said that, there are also studies, though few and far between, located amongst dalit communities in the space of the city, which have engaged with the caste-class nexus in fruitful ways.

Vijay Prashad (2000), in his study of the social history of the *balmiki* community in the city of Delhi, locates the *construction* of the *balmiki* identity. He suggests that several 'lower' caste communities were constructed as a community of sweepers upon their migration to the city. Nandini Gooptu (1993), in her analysis of the *bhakti* cults amongst the urban 'untouchable' castes in the Uttar Pradesh of the early twentieth century, also locates the links between occupation and caste in the urban context. Similarly Lynch (1969), in his study of the *jatav* community in Agra, locates the economy of leather work, in which the community worked, while focussing on the influence of Buddhism in structuring their identities.

While none of these studies are gendered, I locate myself along with this literature in the argument that culture and economics are equally important in understanding caste and class. Moreover, I shall argue that caste processes do not recede to the confines of the 'private' and the domestic space in the context of the city. While the city may



be understood as relatively caste-free within dalit politics, this does not mean that class is eroding caste, but that caste is reconstituting and re-formulating itself within the context of the city.

## **Caste and Gender**

The last two decades have seen an upsurge in the literature on caste and gender that centre dalit women. In this section I shall review the material on dalit women as well as trace the ways in which caste and gender have been understood together. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) has conceptualised the oppression suffered by dalit women in terms of the triple oppression of caste, class and gender (NFDW, 2002). Sharmila Rege elaborates on the triple oppression of dalit women's lives in terms of the division of labour, the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour (Rege, 1996, 2000a). Further, Uma Chakravarthi (1995) has analysed the relation between caste, class and gender in terms of a *brahminical* patriarchy. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) also have analysed caste, class and gender, but for an account of dominant caste women's lives in an urban context. In much of these analyses, it is the broad themes of caste, class and gender that are used to analyse the conditions of dalit (and dominant caste) women's lives.

I shall argue that although the themes of caste, class and gender are invoked to understand the conditions of dalit women's lives, much of this literature centres on the themes of controls on sexuality and access to economic resources. Still further, these themes, while overwhelming in delineating the particular conditions of dalit women's lives also demarcate the differences *between* women (Rao, 2003b).

In such a context, Anupama Rao has suggested that 'dalit women and their lives constitute a site of *difference*, standing at an oblique to the questions and strategies adopted by a mainstream upper-caste feminism' (1999: 205; emphasis in original). Gopal Guru (1995) has analysed the proliferation of dalit feminist groups in terms of a 'politics of difference' from dominant caste feminism. Further, the neglect of the dalit women question by both the dalit movement as well as the women's movement, finds recurring expression in the literature on a dalit feminist politics (Pawar, 1994; Bandhu, 1995; Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Manorama, 2000; Thorat, 2001). There is therefore, a 'politics of difference' that structures the articulation of the specificity of dalit women's lives.

Questions of caste and gender have also been seen in terms of the problems they pose for a contemporary feminist politics (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999). Tharu and Niranjana delineate the contradictions between the interests of dominant caste and dalit women, especially in the violent contexts of Mandal, Chunduru and the rise of Hindutva<sup>14</sup>. The question of the subject of a 'feminist' project is thrown into sharp relief when the interests of different groups of women are in conflict. In such a

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<sup>14</sup> The Mandal Commission report, which recommended 27 per cent reservation for 'backward castes' was sought to be implemented in 1990 by the then Prime Minister, VP Singh. This sparked off a series of violent riots, where the methods of protest ranged from street cleaning, boot polishing to self-immolation. The involvement of women in these upper caste-student led riots is what Tharu and Niranjana refer to. In the instance of Chunduru, thirteen dalits were murdered by upper caste *reddys* in the August of 1991, in the village of Chunduru. This was the violent culmination of a series of hostile encounters spread across two to three years, the catalysing event of which was the incursion into the cinema hall space reserved by tradition for members of the upper castes by a young dalit graduate. The involvement of *reddy* women in accusing the dalit men of a long history of sexual abuse is what Tharu and Niranjana refer to here (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999: 499-505; also see Iliah, 1994; Murali, 1995). The contradictions in the interests of dominant caste women and dalit women relates to the meanings of women's agency for a feminist project. In such a context, what the mobilisation of women in right-wing movements means for a feminist politics has received increasing attention. Tanika Sarkar has argued that the foregrounding of women and the enabling consequences for some women needs to be acknowledged, while also suggesting that this does not mean that this mobilisation of women is a feminist project. Irene Gedalof reads this argument as clearing the analytical space for an understanding that all mobilisation of women need not be geared toward a feminist project (Gedalof, 1999: 52-53; also see Chakravarti, 2002). The issue of the reservations for women in



context, the specificity of dalit women's experiences, in terms of the differences from and similarities with dominant caste women's experiences, takes on the added significance of locating a specifically dalit feminist project.

The literature on caste and gender is indeed diverse<sup>15</sup>. In this chapter, I am concerned with reviewing the literature on caste and gender that specifically analyses the ways in which the themes of controls on sexuality and access to economic resources have been understood to structure the lives of dalit women, as well as indicating the differences between women. Endogamy, as a structuring principle, has been a recurring theme in analysing the *making* of caste and gender. I start by unravelling the ways in which endogamy has been analysed for a caste and gendered politics.

### ***Endogamy and Marriage Circle***

Ambedkar has been influential in signalling the importance of endogamy in analysing the 'essence' of caste. In his essay entitled 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' (Ambedkar, 1916: 1-21), he searches for the basis of the caste system in a process of distinguishing between essences and effects/characteristics (the idea of pollution, inter-dining) of caste. He proposes, that amongst the various characteristics of caste, endogamy is the only one that can be called the essence of caste. He argues that 'if we succeed in showing how endogamy

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parliament have also thrown up other similar issues in terms of the contradictions between the interests of a 'feminist' politics and that of dalit women (see Raju, MP, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> There have been literary writings by dalit women (Swaroop Rani, 1998; Bama, 2000; Pawar, 2002a) as well as caste and gendered analyses of literary writings (Rajan, Rajeshwari 1993; Pandian, 1998; Natrajan, 1999; Tharu, 1999; Chakravarti, 2000a, 2000b). There have also been narrative accounts by dalit women as well as analysis of the same (Bhave, 1988; Viramma and others, 1997; Dasgupta, 2000; Chakravarti, 2000b). There is also an increasing literature on the 'feminist' impulses and analyses of leaders such as Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar as well as the work that they spawned (O'Hanlon, 1985, 1994; Dietrich, 1992; Chakravarti, 1996b, 1998; Pardeshi, 1997, 2003; Geetha, 1998b, no date; Sonalkar, 1999; Zelliot, 2003; Anandhi, 2003).



is maintained, we shall practically have proved the genesis and also the mechanism of caste' (Ambedkar, 1916: 5).

Presuming the desire of the creation of castes on the part of certain groups, he puts forth an obliquely gendered analysis of the formulation of castes. To the group that is desirous of creating castes, he suggests an outer circle has to be demarcated which cannot be transgressed. The most efficient method of curtailing membership is to make membership ascriptive. This requires that the numbers between the sexes in this group has to be maintained, so that conjugal relations can be contained within it. This he suggests, is maintained by the systems of sati and compulsory widowhood; which implies an imposed celibacy and girl marriage. The surplus women are disposed of and the surplus men are catered to (Ambedkar, 1916: 5-12). To the question of how this got replicated within the entire society, he offers a 'psychological' explanation: 'the infection of imitation' (Ambedkar, 1916: 16) and a 'mechanistic' explanation: while closing themselves in, castes close other groups out, who in turn are forced to form themselves into castes (Ambedkar, 1916: 19, 20).

This understanding of endogamy, as a structuring principle of both caste and gender, has been taken up by feminists interested in articulating the relationship between caste and gender. Partima Pardeshi (1997) builds on Ambedkar's argument to suggest that 'women are the gateways to the caste system', because it is only through the regulation and control of women's sexuality that the closed character of castes can be maintained. She further suggests, drawing from Ambedkar, that the caste system is opposed to mixed marriages. By delineating the types of marriage that are

acceptable and those that are not<sup>16</sup>, she argues that there is a sexual dialectics at play that institutionalises the sexual access to some women and prevents other women from transgressing the boundaries of caste (1997: 9-11).

Gabriele Dietrich (1992) is far more cautious about the extent to which Ambedkar's analysis is useful for understanding patriarchal controls over women in different caste communities. She suggests however, that the analysis of endogamy as a marriage circle, as propounded by Ambedkar as well as by Morton Klass, is useful in understanding the functioning of caste. This view is echoed by Sonalkar (1999) who posits that while Ambedkar recognised that the caste system was perpetuated by endogamy, and suggested at a certain point that inter-caste marriage was the only method of eliminating caste, he later saw the inadequacy of this action taken on its own.

On the other hand, V Geetha examines Periyar's conception of marriage to suggest that, according to him, the institution of marriage reified the inscription of female sexuality within the terms of private property. She argues that for Periyar, marriage 'regulated and disciplined women's familial and reproductive labour, even as it actively denied their desires and their rights to a self-respecting life of their choice. Of whatever caste or class, the bond of marriage [...] invariably rendered women a property and slave of her husband' (Geetha, no date: 8).

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<sup>16</sup> She elaborates on the two kinds of mixed marriages: *pratiloma* (hypogamy) and *anuloma* (hypergamy). *Pratiloma* refers to a marriage between a man of a lower caste and a woman of a higher caste, and *anuloma* refers to a marriage between a woman of a lower caste and a man of a higher caste. While, *anuloma* marriages are permissible, *pratiloma* marriages are not (Pardeshi, 1997: 10; also see John, M, 1998).



The understandings of the 'controls on women's sexuality' is therefore, a central concept in accounting for a caste, gendered politics; whether understood in terms of endogamy or a marriage circle. On the other hand, a gendered account of the 'institution of marriage' allows for an analysis of the commonalities between women of different castes and classes, where not only is sexuality controlled, but also women's access to private property is curtailed. However, the history of *differences* between women of different castes is a recurring theme in the literature, as I have indicated earlier. In the next section, I shall discuss the ways in which this 'difference' has been located in the debates.

### ***Gender and the Differences Between Caste Communities***

Nicholas Dirks, while tracing the career of caste as it was mired and recast in colonial history, argues that this history is also gendered, as 'most of the issues that attracted the attention of social reformers, from widow burning to prohibitions around widow remarriage and controversies over the age of consent, were embedded within caste protocols and related to caste status' (2001: 17). The configuration of the caste and gender question as being bound up in colonial history is a recurrent theme in many understandings of the construction of an 'Indian' womanhood. This construction has been analysed in terms of several practices affecting 'women's' lives such as sati, child marriage, widow re-marriage, restitution of conjugal rights and the devadasi practice (Mani, 1989; Sangari and Vaid, 1989; Kannabiran, 1995; Nair, 1996b; Chakravarti, 1996a, 1998; Chowdhury, 1996).

The argument that is made in many of these analyses is that the construction of womanhood in colonial history was re-configured based on the contestations around

‘Indian tradition’. This ‘Indian tradition’ was mostly understood in terms of a (textual) analysis of dominant caste Hindu practice, in conversation with the legitimacy of the colonial state to legislate on ‘private’ matters relating to the family. It has been suggested in most of these analyses that the fall-out of these reconfigurations was a construction of a dominant caste womanhood as applicable to all ‘Hindu’ women. Therefore, ‘lower caste’ practices that allowed for re-marriage, for instance, were ignored in the promulgation of new laws, based on *brahminical* practices.

Therefore, Janaki Nair (1996b) writes about how the (changing) laws banning child marriage, promulgated by the Mysore state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, affected ‘lower caste’ communities. The logic of the law banning child marriage amongst ‘Hindu’ communities, relied, amongst other things, on an understanding of a prohibition on widow remarriage amongst these communities<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, when the state sought to prosecute two *madiga* men for allowing a child marriage, the men pointed out that ‘*kudike* (a form of widow remarriage) was *lawful* and allowed in their caste’ (1996b: 160; emphasis in original). Nair suggests that a number of others who faced prosecution made a similar argument:

In September 1896, Halasaya and Soman, two Kuruba (shepherd caste) men of Chickbasur, Kadur taluk, who had arranged the marriage of Lingi (aged 6) daughter of the former, with Mallaya (aged about 12), son of the latter, argued that the local law-ways of the Kurubas not only allowed widow remarriage but also adult marriage. Muniga and Sanjiva, two Agasa (washerman caste) men who were warned by the officiating priest in 1896 that child marriage was now liable for criminal prosecution, replied that this ‘was allowable in the caste’. (1996b: 161)

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<sup>17</sup> Janaki Nair indicates that the Dewan of Mysore used figures from the census of 1891 to argue that, ‘child marriage was an “evil”: child marriage resulted in an inordinate number of married women below the age of 9, but worse, an unconscionable number of them were widows’ (Nair, 1996b: 161).



Nair goes on to suggest that in Mysore, apart from the *brahmin* and *komati* communities, the strictures against widow remarriage were rarely operative. While on the other hand, child marriage was fairly common, some numerically preponderant communities such as the *kurubas*, not only allowed adult marriages, but also had no practice of social discrimination against women who remained unmarried (1996b: 162).

Uma Chakravarti (1989, 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1998) has written extensively on the question of caste and gender. In her analysis of the colonial intervention in the woman question, she specifies the modes of the construction of 'Indian womanhood'. She argues that there has been a double move: first, there has been an erasure of the history of the vedic *dasi* (dalit woman?) and second, 'Indian womanhood' has been recast with reference to a purported 'golden age' of 'upper caste' practice (1989: 23).

However, in her work on the Peshwai regime (an orthodox *brahmin* regime), centred on the Poona Deccan region, prior to British colonisation (Chakravarti, 1996a, 1998: 3-42), and in her other works on the '*brahminical* social order' (1993, 1995), Uma Chakravarti locates a *brahminical* patriarchy outside of a colonial engagement as well. This *brahminical* patriarchy, she argues, relies on the organising principle of the subordination of the upper caste woman. Through the figure of the *brahmin* widow (banned from re-marrying), she argues for an analysis of the controls on sexuality as an exercise in maintaining patrilineal succession, as well as caste purity (see especially, 1993).

In her analysis of the Peshwai regime (Chakravarti, 1996a, 1998: 3-42) she explains that the sexuality of all women was closely monitored, although according to different norms. Everything about women's sexuality was up for scrutiny and regulation: 'who could be legitimate wives, which women could remarry, which women must practice ascetic widowhood and never remarry, which women must have their heads tonsured, which women must be excommunicated for their lapses, by what age women must marry' (1996a: 10).

She also writes that textual or *sastric* law was favoured over customary law during this regime and that while there was surveillance of *all* categories of women, in the case of high caste women, this meant virtual confinement within the domain of the household. Writing about the differences between castes in practice in 18<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra, she suggests that difference was manifested in the case of enforced widowhood and the remarriage of widows, with the strictest ban on remarriage reserved for the highest caste (Chakravarti, 1996a: 11-14).

Therefore the figure of the widow seems to have demarcated between castes, not only because the 'brahmin widow carried the purity of the household on her tonsured head' (Chakravarti, 1996a: 15), but also because caste rank was understood as being determined by whether or not a caste allowed for the remarriage of widows. In analysing the practices of remarriage and cohabitation amongst 'low caste' women, on the other hand, Chakravarti provides a link into the economic basis of the caste system:

Both among the agricultural castes and among the landless low castes, women functioned as direct producers and as reproducers of producers. Their continued sexual activity following widow hood was in consonance with the larger labour needs of the economy. The caste system as a system of production thus shaped the hierarchy of social practices for women. (1996a: 16)



The argument about the differences in practices between upper and lower caste widows is an issue that she specifically addresses in another paper entitled 'Gender, Caste and Labour' (1995). In this paper, she makes the argument that even in the present day context, 'patriarchal practices among the different castes, though dissimilar, are part of a larger structure of caste, production and reproduction' (1995: 2248). She suggests that the differences in practices between upper caste and lower caste widows are to be understood, not just in the ideological terms of 'privilege' of enforced widowhood in terms of caste rank, but also in the productive and reproductive roles of different groups of women.

She further argues that while in *brahmin* society there is a structural opposition to be drawn between a wife and a widow (in reproductive terms), amongst the lower caste *chuhri* widows of a north Indian village, widows of child-bearing age were expected to 'remate'. Only widows with grown children, i.e., one who was past child bearing age, were permitted to remain 'unmated' if they made a declaration to the community to be celibate. This she says, signifies not a recognition of the sexual needs of the widows but an arrangement to utilise the productive and reproductive labour of the women. Such an arrangement, she suggests, would ensure not just the full productive potential of a woman to ensure maximal replenishing of the labouring and servicing castes, but this would also keep land structures intact (Chakravarti, 1995: 2254).

The argument that Chakravarti presents is one of a cohesive hierarchy: while caste practices may be different amongst different caste communities, they can be linked

together by an understanding of the caste hierarchy, production and reproduction. All of these are tied together by an understanding of *brahminical* patriarchy that controls the sexuality of 'upper' caste women, because they are the 'gateways' to miscegeny, and to a disruption of the purity of the caste, and of the caste system itself (1993: 579; also see Liddle and Joshi, 1986: 60). In this way, a strict vigilance over the sexuality of upper caste women would ensure the purity of the caste as well as its rank, reaching its apotheosis, according to Chakravarti, when the caste enforced permanent widowhood. On the other hand, with 'lower' caste widows, it is their reproductive and productive labour that is the focus. Therefore, in Chakravarti's conception of *brahminical* patriarchy, there is an inverse relation between 'culture' and 'economics' and dominant caste women and dalit women.

### *Seclusion as Regulation of the Boundaries of Caste*

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, in their work on caste, class and gender entitled, *Daughters of Independence* (1986: 61-69), analyse the distinctions between the practices of different caste groups in terms of the practice of seclusion. They draw on a historical account of the relationship between caste and gender to establish that the controls on the sexuality of upper caste women are related to the economic supremacy of the caste. They argue that women's sexuality was controlled through seclusion in order to contain property within the caste, produce legitimate heirs and maintain caste purity. Thus they suggest that seclusion provided not only a means of controlling the sexuality of women, but also of establishing economic control over them; low-caste women were not secluded, because their economic contributions were required by the men for survival (1986: 89-90).



The purpose of Rama Joshi and Joanna Liddle's analysis is to present a *materialist* explanation of caste and gender. They attempt to show that both the economic *and* the sexual controls on upper caste women were designed to maintain property within the caste. In doing so, they give analytical priority to the economic aspects and relegate the cultural aspects to a subordinate position in the relationship between caste and gender.

Liddle and Joshi go on to paint a broad picture of the division of labour, as well as the sexual division of labour, amongst caste communities in rural India. They suggest that amongst the lowest caste groups, the women were compelled to take up wage work. Amongst the middle castes, the women withdrew from waged work but performed unpaid labour in the family fields; and amongst the highest castes, women withdrew from outside work altogether. However, amongst all the castes, they suggest women continued to perform domestic labour. In assessing the meanings of each of these instances, they suggest that amongst the lowest castes, despite being paid lower wages than men, the economic contribution of women was visible and vital. At the middle levels, the labour is performed for themselves and not for employers; and at the highest levels, they suggest that women lost the economic power they might have had and became totally dependent on men, while receiving material benefits from their economic position in the caste hierarchy (1986: 90-91).

Having emphasised the *economic differences* between women of different caste communities, they also address the issue of *sexuality* as demarcating differences between women:

Lower caste women, by contrast, experience far fewer controls over their physical freedom. The economic benefits and the social constraints of seclusion are unknown to

them. Sati was never demanded of them, widowhood was no curse, divorce was allowed in many lower-caste communities and widows and divorced people could re-marry without disgrace. (1986: 91)

The analysis that Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi offer seems to suggest that lower caste women, while economically deprived, led more sexually egalitarian (perhaps 'liberated') lives than dominant caste women. There is a tendency toward a romanticism of dalit women's lives in such an account, which is indicative of the underlying tensions in a materialist analysis. I shall argue that the tendencies towards romanticism in accounting for the conditions of dalit women's lives are also indicative of the underlying tensions in a 'politics of difference'. This is because it is difficult to locate and analyse the conditions of dalit women's lives when they are structured by an understanding of difference. These tensions are brought into sharp relief by Urmila Pawar's analysis of the gender question in relation to the dalit movement. She argues:

The dalit woman in contrast to the brahmin woman was not bound by customs such as sati, child marriage, ban on widow re-marriage etc.. The Dalit woman was also not confined to the four walls of the house as was the upper caste woman. She worked with in the fields and other work places along side with the men. She was an earning member of the family and hence had some decision making power within it. Further, unlike the brahmin woman she did not address her husband or elders with imposed veneration. The situation was like that found in the primordial cultures. Contacts with the upper castes had, however, introduced the traditions and customs of the upper castes among the lower castes at least to some extent [...] Of course, though the Dalit woman was comparatively free from some suffocating restrictions, there was a wide gap between Dalit and brahmin women on economic, social and educational levels. She was the woman of a man who was forced to live the life of animals. She was not secure in the family or the community. Along with other caste based atrocities she was also constantly under the threat of rape, in the family she had to tolerate the physical violence and other atrocities of men. (1994: 84-85)

In this account, there is a constant movement between an understanding of the liberation that the dalit women's economic 'independence' provides women, and the oppressive economic deprivation of the dalit community. On the other hand, there is also a movement between an understanding of the 'liberation' of dalit women from



the oppressive cultural practices imposed on dominant caste women, and an understanding of the sexual 'oppression' of dalit women:

A myth is harboured that unlike the brahmin woman the Dalit woman is free from bondage and stifling restrictions. The pain of the Devdasi, the deserted woman and the murali is ignored in this stand. In fact, the woman in the household is yet to get recognition as a full and equal human being. (1994: 94)

Therefore, there is a constant pull between understanding the dalit woman as sexually 'liberated' and economically 'independent'; and an account of the dalit woman as 'oppressed', both sexually and economically.

Sharmila Rege (1996, 1998, 2000), however, draws on Liddle and Joshi's understanding of division of labour and sexual division of labour to elaborate on her conception of the '*brahminical* social order':

In the brahmanical social order, caste-based division of labour and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as a failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste [...] caste determines the division of labour, sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour. (1998: WS-44)

In her account, Rege explains the intersections between caste status, the sexual controls on women, and the involvement of women in economic processes. She argues that the change of status in the caste hierarchy is in tandem with an exclusion of women from productive processes, as well as the imposition of greater sexual controls on women. The implication of her analysis is that while upper caste women are sexually controlled and oppressed *within* the family, lower caste women are subject to sexual oppression in the '*public*' sphere. However, I shall argue, that while this provides a structural explanation for the inter-connectedness of caste and gender,

it does not account for the meanings and consequences of the practices amongst dalit communities, for dalit women.

*Gender and Caste Status: Caste-based Division of Labour and Pollution and Purity*

Leela Dube, in her paper entitled 'Caste and Women' (1996: 1-21), whilst identifying the themes of occupational continuity, marriage and sexuality, food and rituals, as determining the ways in which caste and gender intersect, also specifies the *meanings* of caste status. In her account, caste status, in which women are differently embedded, is determined by the symbolic system of pollution and purity. Therefore, Dube locates, within the caste hierarchy, the gendered meanings of the symbolic system of pollution and purity.

In locating the continuities between caste and occupation, Dube argues that certain 'polluting' gendered occupations such as midwifery continue to retain their association with women of certain castes. She also argues that in occupations that are 'traditional' to particular communities, the roles of women are defined as members of the basic unit of the economy, the household. While suggesting that the continuities of the caste with the occupation are maintained by imparting skills to at least a few members of the group; she locates amongst such communities, the indispensability of the role of women. This is especially so, she suggests in instances of mobility: when men acquire skills for new occupations, or choose to leave behind the 'traditional' occupations, women continue the occupations of the caste. Dube locates such an instance in a study by Karlekar on 'scavenger' women in Delhi that indicates that while men are leaving the 'ritually defiling occupation of their caste', women continue in the same occupation (1996: 2-5).



Dube also locates the idiom of 'food and rituals' in the articulation of both the exclusiveness of caste as bounded entities and inter-caste relationships. She indicates that women, in their socialised roles, are responsible for maintaining the purity of the home, by attending to the rules prescribed in processing, preserving, cooking and distributing food. While food itself, she suggests, is categorised in terms of pollution and purity, Dube focuses on upper caste women to explain the means with which women, specifically upper caste widows, have to conform to, and are controlled by, norms relating to food and rituals. Upper caste women, she argues, when widowed, are to give up consumption of foods which are *tamasik*, those which raise passion and desire. Meat is considered impure for castes such as the *brahmins* and amongst the middle and lower castes, abstinence from food such as meat is common in preparation for a ritual (1996: 6-9).

Dube suggests that the prohibitions on upper caste women, especially widows, is also related to the constructions of marriage and sexuality. Therefore widowhood, she suggests, renders the body of the upper caste woman impure. However, she argues that practices are different amongst lower caste communities. In analysing the differences in practices between communities, she suggests, 'while some of the disabilities imposed on widows are prevalent among all castes, it can be argued that concerns of purity/impurity along the gender divide have an inverse relationship with the ritual status of castes' (1996: 10). Dube also locates bodily processes, such as menstruation and parturition, amongst the other events that constitute pollution. She argues that a menstruating woman is considered impure in both lower and upper castes and in both instances, this results in segregation (1996: 9-20).

But Karin Kapadia argues that amongst the non-*brahmin* community that she studied in Tamil Nadu, menstruation is regarded as extremely auspicious, even as it is seen as an occasion of great ritual impurity (1995: 71). This, she argues, is due to the significance attached to female fertility and the reproduction of the community amongst the lower castes.

However, Dube locates the symbolic system of pollution and purity associated with the practices of menstruation and parturition in the cultural perception of the difference in male and female sexuality. Therefore, she argues that the practices are gendered, but cannot necessarily be differentiated in terms of caste (1996: 10). Dube further argues that:

The cultural apprehension of the vulnerability of women and the emphasis on their purity and restrained behaviour which entail limited interaction with the opposite sex, are important components of caste society. The emphasis on arranged or negotiated marriages and the proper organisation of space and time for young girls after puberty derive their justification from this concern with boundary maintenance, which means the maintenance of the ritual purity of the caste. (1996: 12)

Therefore, Dube ties up her argument on 'marriage and sexuality' with an understanding of the links between the prescription for the *virginity* and the purity of women. These controls on women's sexuality, she argues are to maintain the boundaries of caste (1996: 13).

Dube's account attempts to draw a gendered conception of caste through a gendered analysis of the various 'characteristics' of caste: occupational roles, rules regarding commensality and connubiality, endogamy, and determined by the symbolic system of pollution and purity. In a sense, Dube's account is framed by an understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy. As I have suggested earlier, an understanding of caste as



ritual hierarchy tends to give predominance to the symbolic (cultural) aspects of caste relations. Further, it is unable to account for relations outside of ritual hierarchy.

### *The Gendered Violence of Caste*

Another point of entry in studies of the relation between gender and caste is through an analysis of the violence that results from the many boundaries that are drawn between caste communities, for both upper and lower caste women. Prem Chowdhry (1997) draws attention to the violence perpetrated on women (and men) in the context of inter-caste and intra-caste marriages that infringe on cultural norms and customary practices.

Most of the cases that she talks about in rural and semi-urban social groups in northern India are marriages between upper caste women and lower caste men, but some are within couples of the same caste, but outside customary practices of marriage. One of the reasons she attributes to such violence, that sometimes results in the death of the couple, is 'the introduction of the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 which enabled for the first time, daughter, sister, widow and mother to inherit land with full proprietary rights to its disposal' (Chowdhry, 1997: 1025).

She argues therefore, that the most virulent objection to the breach of caste/community taboos in marriage, comes from the powerful land-owning classes. Her analysis is that not only does the daughter pose a threat to the property by marrying out of the caste, but also if she marries within the natal village, because this spells a danger to patrilineal inheritance, since it facilitates and could lead to

assumption of land by her. Thus, she suggests, 'tightening of restrictions on marriage practice emphasising village exogamy and caste endogamy has the effect of negating the progressive fallout of the inheritance enablement law' (Chowdhry, 1997: 1026).

Chowdhry therefore locates the violence visited upon women (and men) who violate caste boundaries in terms of patrilineal inheritance as well. Therefore, she locates the tightening controls on the sexuality of women to the containment of property within her family.

J. Indira (1997) has examined the meanings of sexual violence, specifically rape, as a 'crime', in her analysis of the intersection of caste and gender. Her argument is that the nature of Indian rape law is incongruent with the question of the sexual oppression of dalit women, because it makes a lot of presumptions by reinforcing an unquestioned, monolithic category 'woman'. Her argument is that the law on rape violates the specific conditions of dalit women's lives. Constructions of the sexuality of dalit women determine the nature of consent that is attributable to them. This argument has found resonance in the analysis of the judgement on the rape of Bhanwari Devi<sup>18</sup>.

Anupama Rao (1999: 242-243), in her analysis of the juridical discourse on Bhanwari Devi suggests that, the judge conceals an assumption about the rules of

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<sup>18</sup> Bhanwari Devi, a grassroots worker in the Rajasthan Government's Women's Development Programme, from the *kumher* caste classified as 'other backward class' was gang-raped in the September of 1992, by the powerful *gujjars* of her village, for agitating against the practice of child marriage in her district. In the extraordinary judgement that followed, the judge in acquitting the men argued, 'The Court is of the opinion that Indian culture has not fallen to such low depths; that someone who is brought up in it, an innocent, a rustic man, will turn into a man of evil conduct who disregards caste and age differences and becomes animal enough to assault a woman' (as quoted in Rao, 1999: 243).



alliance and sexuality, when he blatantly disregards the rape of Bhanwari Devi by arguing that these men would be uninterested in raping a lower-caste woman. Rao further argues that:

It is the cross-cutting of the discourse of sexuality *and* alliance with the discourse of caste taboo that leads to the extraordinary space accorded to Bhanwari Devi in the judgement. The judge asks: what perversity propels Bhanwari to imagine being raped by Gujjars, when they would not even consider her worthy of such defilement? (1999: 243)

Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) have also analysed the meanings of the violence against dalit women in caste and gendered terms. Analysing a particular instance of violence where rape was used as a retaliatory weapon against a dalit woman, who made public demands for higher wages, they argue that the dalit woman who makes such public demands engages in a two-fold transgression; firstly, of her caste status of passivity and submission and secondly, of asserting herself in a gendered space (1991: 2132).

All of these arguments locate the incredible violence visited upon *women* when they transgress the parameters of caste and sexual alliance and behaviour. However, J Indira also locates the emasculation of the dalit *male* in these violations:

No case of caste violence can be understood as an isolated incident. While rape can be understood as a manifestation of patriarchal oppression, additional factors like caste and class mediate the magnitude of oppression on those sections which are historically subordinated. In order to address these problems, (one should) raise questions about the attacks on the sexuality of dalit men as well. (Indira, 1997: 52)

In the accounts on the violence inflicted on women for transgressing caste boundaries, it is *inter*-caste relations that dominate. While these accounts are extremely important to locate the terrifying forms of violence against dalit women, dalit men and dominant caste women, there is a gap in accounting for the violence inflicted on *dalit women* outside of the inter-caste, 'public' context. In fact, when

Sharmila Rege distinguishing between the violence in dalit women and in dominant caste women's lives, she separates the 'private' and 'public' forms of violence against dominant caste and dalit women:

[...] an analysis of the practices of violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper castes – dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and in public. (1998: WS-43)

However, does such an account allow for an analysis of patriarchal controls on *dalit women*, amongst dalit communities, in the 'private' sphere? While Rege has argued that a division of labour, a sexual division of labour and a division of sexual labour account for an understanding of *brahminical* patriarchy, *caste-based patriarchies* and endogamy (1998), she has also pointed to the silence on the subject of caste-based patriarchies for dalit women:

That an internal critique of patriarchy in dalit politics is much needed is beyond doubt and the importance of such a critique for political radicalism has been in fact overdetermined (Rege, 2000: 494).

In this thesis, I am concerned with the ways in an internal critique of patriarchy in dalit politics in the specific context of Bangalore, has been articulated. However, I shall also argue through the course of this research that the shape, form and contents of this critique continues to be mired in the politics of difference. To excavate a meaningful gendered dalit politics, I argue that we have to confront this politics of difference.

In the literature on caste and gender, while the themes of caste, class and gender have been used to articulate the specificity of the lives of dalit women, this specificity has predominantly been located in the themes of sexual control and access to economic resources. Further, the themes of economic access and sexual control of women have



been used to specify the *differences* between women. An understanding of ‘*brahminical* patriarchy’ allows for an important conception of the ways in which caste status, the productive roles of women in the ‘public’ sphere, access of women to property, the sexual controls on women, the violence inflicted on women for transgressing the boundaries of caste, etc are inter-linked. However, I indicate that in specifying the ways in which all of these are inter-linked, there is a tension in accounting for the *difference* in the lives of women of various castes.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed several sets of literature that are relevant to my research. I have indicated that while there are myriad conceptions of caste, an understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy dominates both in sociological analyses of caste, as well as in the politics of figures such as Ambedkar and Gandhi. Therefore, in more ways than one, this understanding of caste has been influential. An understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy, in Dumont’s account, provides an opposition between the holistic hierarchy of caste and the self-identification and perceptions of communities. While it allows us to perceive that ritual hierarchy has to be dismantled to do away with the structure of caste, it does not account for the political nature of caste relations. Further, I indicate that an understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy is emblematic of the difficulties in analysing caste and class together. Moreover, there has been a disjunction between analyses of caste and class conceptually as well as historically, as evidenced in the politics of caste and class movements of the early 1900s and in more recent times. This disjunction has been in the separation of ‘culture’ and ‘economics’ in the analysis of caste and class, respectively.

In the context of urban space, it seems that there has been another disjunction. Cities have been understood as spaces where the 'ritual' content of caste cannot operate. Further, in analyses of caste in cities, there has been a tendency to locate the continuation of 'caste practices' within the 'private' domain. This continuation has been understood in terms of 'ethnicism', where caste practices mark 'cultural differences' (and not hierarchy) between communities. The underlying assumption in such analyses is an understanding of the 'village' as reflecting the cosmos of Indian civilisation. I also indicate that this understanding of 'village', from the perspective of dalit politics invites an equation with *caste*. However, an understanding of caste-free lives for dalit communities in the city sits uneasily with a recognition that it was in the cities that dominant caste communities consolidated their position.

The literature on caste and gender revolves around the themes of caste, class and gender, especially in articulating the specificity of the experiences of dalit women. This literature ties together an understanding of caste status, women's productive roles and the sexual controls imposed on women. While this literature is important, I also indicate that there is a tendency toward romanticising dalit women's lives in articulating *how* dalit women's lives are different from dominant caste women. Further, there has been an absence of literature that deals specifically with a *dalit* patriarchy.

In summation, the literature reviewed here negotiates a number of recurrent oppositions: the material (or the economic) versus the symbolic (or the cultural), class versus status, caste as local, particularised communities versus more



generalised schemas of *varna*, and finally, caste in the village versus caste in the modern city. Given the significance of endogamy in the definition and maintenance of caste boundaries, gender divisions amongst caste communities could hardly be ignored. Feminist scholarship has undertaken a systematic rethinking of caste through the lens of gender. But as we have seen, feminist interventions have had to negotiate the same oppositions and distinctions.

This study is focused on a number of grassroots dalit political groups in the city of Bangalore. It is concerned with bringing into focus the highly political and contested nature of caste relations, through examining aspects of dalit politics in Bangalore. It offers an analysis of the data generated in fieldwork from interviews, focus group discussions and other materials with the specific purpose of identifying a 'dalit feminist politics' at the grassroots level. It will show that the same oppositions that are negotiated with such difficulty in the literature, are found amongst the positions taken and the strategies of the grassroots organisations. In locating a gendered dalit politics in Bangalore, it will be interested in uncovering the tensions around the 'politics of difference' in negotiating identity that have proved to be so contentious for contemporary feminism.

## Chapter 2

# Methodology and the Development of the Conceptual Frame: Processes of Research and Production

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined different sets of literature to locate the ways in which caste, class and gender have been understood together, as well as the absences on the subject of a gendered dalit experience in the city. In this chapter, I trace the processes of research and production of this thesis. I present the initial research design, the purported aims of the thesis prior to the field work and the methods set out to examine the research questions. I then locate the processes of the field work. Here, I describe the difficulties and dilemmas in the process of research and locate the ways in which I identified the groups and informants, the ways in which the research process transformed the research questions, the profiles of the groups chosen and the samples obtained for the purposes of analysis. In the following section, I set out the processes of analysis and the analytical tools I arrived at using through the course of the research. In laying out the analytical tools that I use in the thesis, I provide a situated context of the framework of ‘difference’ in dalit feminist politics.

It has been argued by researchers analysing the methods and processes of field work, that the process of research is indeed extremely *messy* (Bryman and Burgess, 1994: 2-3). Feminist researchers have cautioned against the censoring of this mess in the production of ‘hygienic research’, even as they have acknowledged that ‘our



accounts are full of silences too' (Maynard and Purvis, 1994: 1-9; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994: 41-47). While the reasons for the caution against censorship are located in pedagogical feminist praxis, the silences, it has been argued, are related to the lack of predominance given to methodology (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994: 46) as well as to the academic conditions of production especially for a junior researcher (Lal, J, 1999: 123).

In such a context, the task of recovering the research process and putting it up for scrutiny, by placing the researcher with her class, race, culture, gender (and caste) assumptions, beliefs and behaviours, within the frame of the picture that she attempts to paint (Harding, 1987: 9), is fraught with varying investments and pressures. This is especially so when reflexivity tends to give authorial voice to the already speaking researcher and obscures and displaces the subjects of research (Lal, J, 1999: 123). Jayati Lal has argued, however, that we need to hold onto the reflexive methodological practices of situating the 'self-other dynamics in the ethnographic encounter' because it allows for the explicit 'deconstruction of field work, thereby rendering it as non-transparent' (Lal, J, 1999: 123).

Therefore, the relations of the research process; between me, as feminist researcher/activist, middle class, *lingayat*, and the respondents: dalit activists, domestic workers, *madiga*, *dalit* Christian, slum dwellers, women, form a crucial component of this chapter. This is coupled with the context for the relations, in terms of my theoretical and personal baggage. Further, this chapter is about the ways in which these relations transformed the research, in terms of the research questions and the modes of analysis. Therefore, in the first section, I contextualise the processes of

the field work by elaborating on the initial research design. This I do by locating the purported aims of the research, the research questions prior to the field work and the framework of difference with which I ‘entered’ the field.

But first a word on the messiness of the research process. Although this chapter is broadly divided into two parts: first, the processes leading up to and through the field work, and second, the ways in which I dealt with the material and questions from the field work, the two parts are intimately linked in the process of analysis. This is because the process of arriving at an analytical framework has not been linear, data collection and then, analysis of data. The *modes* of analysis are crucially linked to the ways in which my research evolved through the research process. Questions of location, access, legitimacy, representation as well as the issues thrown up by the respondents (once I started *listening*), crucially shaped and sharpened not just the questions of my research, but also the ways in which I sought to analyse the discourses that my respondents were engaged in.

## **Initial Research Design**

### ***The Initial Aims and Research Questions***

The questions that were central to my research when I started the PhD were related to the ‘experiences’ of dalit women living in the slums of Bangalore in terms of labour, sexuality and violence. Therefore, there were two broad sets of issues that were at the heart of the thesis: the experiences of a gendered dalit identity in the context of a city, and the ways in which these experiences were different from dominant caste women’s experiences in the terms of labour, sexuality and violence. These questions were central because there was a silence in the literature on gendered (dalit) caste



relations in the context of an urban space, and the tropes of sexuality and labour were the most prominent in discussions of the differences between women on the basis of caste.

However, the principal theoretical baggage with which I engaged with this material was an interest in interrogating two distinct binary forms of representation of dalit women, which were lurking beneath most analyses of caste and gender: the dalit woman as liberated, sexually and because of her economic ‘independence’ and the dalit woman as repressed; sexually violated through her sexual ‘availability’, as well as through the social and economic controls on her labour in terms of production as well as reproduction.

Therefore, the initial research questions were framed in the following manner:

1. What are the embodied experiences of dalit women in the slums of Bangalore?

What do they tell us about relationships of gender, caste and class in Bangalore?

1.1 What are the occupations that poor dalit women do/are expected to do in the city?

What are their experiences of labour? What patterns of division of labour exist, in terms of the division of labour between different castes and the gendered division of labour within castes, both in the ‘public’ and the domestic spheres? In what ways do these occupations/experiences of labour inform/reinscribe/transform relations of gender, caste and class?

1.2 What are the real/imagined/symbolic constructions of dalit women’s sexuality in the city? In what ways do dalit women experience sexual relations in Bangalore?

What are the hierarchies that reinscribe, and the relations that liberate dalit women in caste, gender and class terms?

1.3 In what ways are the relations of violence that dalit women experience encoded?

How do these relate to labour and sexuality, in the specific context of being dalit and women, living in the slums of Bangalore? In what ways do they resist/conform to these relations of violence?

2. What are/have been the utopias/transformations envisaged by dalit women in the slums of Bangalore?

I was to realise through the process of the research that these research questions were too broad and general. They were also framed in ways that provoked a ‘politics of difference’. As the work progressed, they were to shift substantially. This shift occurred especially in response to the questions thrown up by the field work and my interaction with the respondents. Once the questions were sharpened, I also had to confront the problem that I was doing too much. The scope of the research had to be tailored to the time and resource constraints of a single trainee-researcher. I will trace the transformations of the research questions in the section on ‘Research Process’ (see below).

### *‘Difference’ as Paradigmatic*

As I have suggested earlier, ‘difference’ as a framework was paradigmatic to my understanding of the specificity of dalit women’s experiences. The fundamental assumptions in the initial design of my research were that dalit women’s experiences were different from dominant caste women’s experiences and that this difference



could be probed by examining dalit women's relations of sexuality and labour. In a sense, as Anupama Rao has said of her own work, 'the existence of caste-specific patriarchies' was taken as a fundamental assumption (1999: 208).

There is an immense amount of literature on difference, especially in relation to feminist work<sup>1</sup>. While I shall discuss the ways in which my understanding of difference changed through the course of the field work and through the processes of producing this thesis (see 'research process' as well as 'process of production' below), I want to suggest that the difference paradigm, in terms of 'difference' as a mode of analysing the specificity of experience, consumed much of my initial theorising and my initial forays into the field. This is not to suggest that I *only* sought out ways in which dalit women were different from dominant caste women. In fact, I fervently sought to resist the binary of 'dalit women as repressed/dalit women as liberated', so much so that at times, I did not *listen* to the subjects of my research. Therefore, in the suggestion that 'difference framed my initial understandings', I mean that my initial work was over-determined by difference in a number of ways.

Yet some of the issues that were of interest to me prior to my field work were specifically to do with the politics of location and representation. Therefore, along with the assumption of the specificity of dalit women's experience, was an acute

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<sup>1</sup> See Maynard (1994a: 9-25) where she specifically engages with the usefulness of the concept of difference for an analysis of the relationship between race and gender; Diana Coole (1996: 17-25) where she asks whether 'class is a difference that makes a difference?'; Fraser (1997a) where she traces the history of the 'difference' debate in the United States; Andemahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz (2000: 61-63) for the various meanings of difference in radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist, cultural, black and post-structuralist feminism; and Hughes (2002: 57-82) where she classifies the various strands of difference in feminist thought. In the Indian context, the 'difference' debate has been markedly framed by understandings of community and multiplicity of patriarchies, specifically in terms of nationalism, communalism and religion, and in recent times, by sexuality and caste. See especially Kumkum Sangari (1995a and 1995b), Irene Gedalof (1999), Sangari and Vaid (1989,

awareness of the ethical dilemmas of researching dalit women. I did not want to carry the burdens of researching the other from an upper-caste politics of apology and guilt while creating a fetish out of the 'abjectness' of dalit women's lives through brahminical modes of theorising (Rao, 1999). Neither did I want to replicate the analytical strategies that Chandra Mohanty (1991) has famously cautioned against in the construction of the third world woman as object<sup>2</sup>. As a consequence, it was the feminist ethics of reflexivity, participation and action research that were central to my research design.

### *Methods of Research*

The question of *what* (should) does constitute feminist research has been prominent in analyses of feminist methodology (see for instance Mies, 1983; Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987; Cook and Fonow, 1990; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Maynard, 1994b). Accountability, reflexivity, action research, grounded theory, a critical cognisance of the power relations between researcher and the subject of research and the links between feminist theory and practice, in terms of pedagogical praxis, have become some of the defining principles of feminist research, even if they are not 'owned' by feminist researchers. In this section, I shall briefly expand on the methods of participatory research and focus group discussions/group interviews that were central to the research design.

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1999), John and Niranjana (1999) and Flavia Agnes (2000). For an account of difference in relation to gender and caste, see Chapter 1, as well as the section on the 'Processes of Production' (below).

<sup>2</sup> Julie Stephens (1989) makes a similar (contested- see Tharu, 1989) critique of the category of non-western women in the writings of Indian feminists.



### *Participatory Research*

Participatory research, as a methodological principle and tool, has come to take centre-stage in feminist research, even if it sometimes goes under the awkward name of ‘emancipatory’ research (Humphries, Mertens and Truman, 2000). The idea that feminist research is part of feminist praxis in its quest for changing the status quo, has meant an emphasis on the *active participation* of the researcher in the movements and struggles of women, as well as in their ‘conscientization’ (Mies, 1983: 124-125). It has also come to mean a focus on the *participants’* involvement in the research design and in the directions of the research (Gluck and Patai, 1991; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Humphries, Merten and Truman, 2000).

Feminist theorists have appropriated the methods of participant observation by interrogating both the vantage point of distance that ‘observation’ presumes, as well as the participatory content of their research and the dilemmas that they throw up. Therefore, while they have critiqued the dichotmization of objective and subjective knowledge production in social research, they have also suggested that there could be potential dissonance in the roles of activist and researcher (see, for an interesting example, Gluck, 1991).

### *Focus Group Research*

While focus groups/group interviews as a method has generally been used in research centred on ‘program evaluation, marketing, public policy, advertising and communication’ (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 10) it has increasingly been assessed for its usefulness in feminist research (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

Barbour and Kitzinger argue that the method is particularly useful for allowing participants to generate 'their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary' (1999: 5).

Sue Wilkinson (1999) makes a similar argument in delineating the advantages of focus group research for feminist research. She argues that focus groups are 'a *contextual* method', that is, they do not separate the social context and interactions of an individual from the individual herself. She also argues that they are a relatively '*non-hierarchical* method', that they tend to shift the balance of power away from the researcher towards the research participants. Wilkinson further suggests that focus group discussions are especially useful with minority groups and in their potential for action research as well as their value as a form of 'consciousness-raising' (1999: 64-65).

Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) have argued that, 'what makes research "feminist" is not the methods as such, but the framework within which they are located, and the particular ways in which they are deployed' (1994: 46). While participatory research and focus groups are the methods through which I sought to do the field work, I argue that the research *evolved* as a 'feminist' project; and this I trace through the research process.

### ***Pilot Study: Identification of Groups***

Prior to the fieldwork between May 2001- March 2002, I had done a pilot study in July-October 2000. The intention of this study was to identify the groups and initiate contacts with the prospective respondents of the research. Since the 'group' with



whom I wanted to do field work was fairly amorphous: 'dalit women living in the slums of Bangalore', I envisaged getting in touch with 'these women' through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other social groups working with dalit women in the slums of Bangalore.

However, when I arrived in Bangalore as a novice researcher in the July of 2000, I was overwhelmed, not just by the enormity of the task, of making contacts and gaining access, but also of explaining my research project in the process of gaining a foothold within the groups that I did meet. My initial contacts were with groups such as Hengasarina Hakkina Sangha (HSS - Women's Rights Group), Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvali (DMC - Dalit and Women's Group), Janasahayog, Slum Jagathu (Slum World) and AVAZ; and with feminist researchers and academics such as Keertana Kumar (film-maker, Guhya), Janaki Nair (then at the Institute for Social and Economic Change - ISEC), Asha Ramesh and Shanta Mohan (NIAS) and Japhet (a professor at the National Law School of India University - who taught me at law school). I made contact with most of these groups and individuals through groups that I already knew, such as the Alternative Law Forum (ALF) which was started by a group of friends, and Samvada with whom, as a young law student, I had done an internship with friends to the Narmada valley.

The groups that I met therefore were very diverse: women's groups, groups working in slums, dalit groups. However, the overwhelming question was: *was my research, as planned, equipped to make sense of these groups?* Who was the subject of my research? The 'authentic dalit woman living in the slums' or the groups working with them? Why would I want to work with one and not the other? And could I really do

that? And there were more confusions, brought home to me by my interactions with the groups and people that I met. Who were the people living in slums? Could I say for sure that they were predominantly dalit? Why were there so many differing opinions on who lived in the slums, surely that was a quantitative fact? What was the significance of my research when there were so many differing opinions, not just on who lived in the slums, but also on caste relations in the city?

Although, through the course of my pilot study I had identified groups such as DMC and AVAZ, that I could work with and which seemed willing to work with me, questions of access, legitimacy and location, the subject of my research as well as the purpose of the thesis in the political context of Bangalore, were by no means resolved. These were questions that I had to contend with right through the course of the research. In the next section, I situate the research process, which was a process of reflecting and attempting to find resolutions to these questions.

## **Research Process**

### ***Processes of Networking: Action Research***

I arrived back home for the second time to conduct field work in the May of 2001. Even though I had already made contact with several groups, re-initiating contact and gaining access to the work of the groups was a difficult process. In the first few weeks of my return home, I was intimidated by how little I knew, not just of progressive groups, but also specifically of dalit groups in Bangalore. Through the course of the fieldwork, I realised that apart from groups such as AVAZ and DMC, there was a vast network of NGOs, groups and individuals who were involved in various kinds of activism in Bangalore. So, apart from renewing contacts with



activist friends, I was once again on a networking plan. Though I did not quite realise it at the time, I now see that this change of track was part of a process of understanding the subject of my research, which was to shift from understanding the dalit woman in the slums of Bangalore as a repository of a particular kind of dalithood to an analysis of dalit identity as contested, by different groups of men and women for varying purposes, with varying investments in dalit identity. I shall illustrate the dilemmas in the ways in which I conceived of difference with two instances.

One of the groups I met very early on in my field work was DISC (Developmental Initiatives for Social Change) which, along with ALF, was working on a project with female street sex workers in the Market areas of Bangalore. I started attending meetings with sex workers arranged by ALF and DISC. The work that ALF and DISC were involved in at the time (now DISC continues the work whilst ALF offers legal aid and support), was to organise female street sex workers, offering legal aid, discussing police brutality and harassment, as well as from providing emotional support to the women who lived on the edges of violence everyday. From all accounts, DISC and ALF were of the opinion that the majority of sex workers were dalit women. In the first two months of my field work, I went along to meetings in the field, Victoria hospital in the KR Market area of Bangalore.

My meetings with the street sex workers were to throw up several issues with regard to the subject of my analysis. With dread in my heart, I see my own initial theorising as rife with essentialisms. In my interactions with the women, I actively sought to understand *how their experiences were different from mine*. Their differences in

experiences and life-situation had to be rooted, amongst other things, in their *caste*. I knew the women themselves and activists working with them identified many issues such as acute poverty, police harassment, sexual harassment, destitution, rape, the dangers of venereal diseases, AIDS, general bad health and a lack of access to resources. I also knew that one of the ways in which they represented themselves was as wives, as respectable women. While all of this information accorded valuable insights into the conditions of their lives, the question that haunted me was: how was this to be linked to caste? Did it suffice that they belonged to a certain caste? Wasn't there an essence of caste that was not quite captured just by their being from that caste which, if probed would reflect in their lives in some ways? Still further, was it because they were from a particular caste that they were sex workers? It was not that I thought I was 'secular'<sup>3</sup>; in fact, implicating myself in caste-class structures only offered more essentialising oppositions: how were the games of respectability that I partook in different from the ones they played? While it seemed easy enough to identify that they definitely did not have access to the resources that I did, would my signalling this make a difference? Or would it objectify them?

Another illustration of the centrality of 'difference' occurred at a focus group discussion/group interview on sexuality in the offices of the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement - KDWM (see Appendix A). The KDWM was a group that I got to know fairly well through the course of the research. I conducted 12 focus group discussions with the women of this group. One such discussion was on sexuality, and especially on the nature and conditions of the sexual relations that the women had

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<sup>3</sup> Dhareshwar (1995a) has argued that in attributing an excess of (caste) identity to 'lower' caste communities, the upper caste self attributes to itself a 'secular' identity. See the section on 'processes of production' (below)



with their partners. Before and during that discussion, I presumed that a lot of the women, once they felt comfortable, would talk about their sexual lives in terms of a complex pattern of enjoyment, denial, frustration as well as violence. I expected that the binary constructions of dalit women's sexuality would be shattered in the session. However, in that particular discussion, most of the women shared the opinion that they did not enjoy sex after they turned 35. Try as I did to evoke a more positive response, the picture that they painted was a bleak and violent one. During that session, I seemed unable to accept the responses of the women, so much so that I broke down during the session much to the bewilderment of the women. This showed that my investment in a 'feminist' conception of sexual politics and agency has to be bracketed by the framework of difference which structured my analysis. My investment in an understanding that dalit women's sexuality was not that *different* prevented me from *listening* to the women. Moreover, I was also making presumptions about 'dominant caste', middle class women's sexual lives.

I have proffered these two accounts to establish several points. There are a number of problems with a mode of analysis that centres difference: for a start it reifies caste, gender as well as experience. Further, it sets up a set of essentialising oppositions between 'mine' and 'their' lives and, because it is over-determined by 'difference', it offers explanations of neither: either in terms of caste, class or gender.

Getting back to the processes of networking, my interactions with the street sex workers did not last through the course of the field work. Since their safety is in their continuous change of work-place, establishing any kind of relationship with the women was difficult, not just for me, but for the activists themselves. The women

attending the meetings were constantly changing, with some women gone 'missing' for weeks and months. The time and energy required to establish meaningful relationships with the women was simply not available to me.

By around July, I stopped making the regular trips to the meetings, not only because I felt I was getting very far, but also because I had established links with other groups that seemed promising. I kept up my links with DISC as they were networked with a lot of other interesting groups in Bangalore. They were also involved in unionising thousands of women in garment factories, where a lot of dalit women find employment in the city. Also, they liased with other people who formed the underbelly of the market area, such as footpath vegetable vendors.

Within a month of arriving in Bangalore, I was lucky to land a part-time job as the librarian in Samvada, an organisation that works with young people: questioning mainstream educational practices, discussing socio-political issues and helping them to organise, as well as providing a support base. This move was in part to do with the lack of economic resources to sustain my field work, as well as to improve opportunities for access and networking with dalit groups in Bangalore.

Samvada works with many groups of young people, in and around Bangalore. Apart from the Bangalore office, the offices in rural Bangalore are situated in Kanakapura and Doddaballapur. Another aspect of Samvada's work is networking. Samvada has created a symbiosis between students, youth and activist communities in NGOs, as well as movements; so much so that they were pivotal in the creation of a new group, Janadvani Yuva Vedike, that is now gaining ground in Doddaballapur. In



Kanakapura it has very close links with the Bahujan Student Federation, the student wing of the Bahujan Samaj Party. It is also closely associated with, and involved in, the activities of the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvali (DMC). More significantly, through its fellowship programme, Samvada has also established close links with many other dalit groups and movements.

Although I did not quite grasp the opportunities it offered before I joined the group, it was a decisive factor in terms, not just of understanding dalit politics in Bangalore and Karnataka, but also in giving me 'insider' access to people involved in dalit politics. The legitimacy that it accorded me was far more than 'doing research in a foreign university' could ever do.

Though I joined part-time as a librarian, I was also involved with most of the activities of Samvada, and therefore took part in activist politics in Bangalore, whether as part of campaigns, sessions with students, Samvada's activities with its fellows, or in solidarity support work with groups in rallies, meetings and events.

Apart from building links with and through Samvada, I also established links with Stree Jagriti Samithi (SJS), where I initially spent time with Gita Menon, the woman who helped start the group. SJS worked specifically with women in slums (many that I met work in domestic labour and are from the *vadda*, *madiga*, *holeya* and muslim communities). Over the years of her work, Gita felt that a shift was required from working only with older, married women with responsibilities to also working with adolescent girls in slums. Again, I noticed later, with a number of women living in the slums, the tensions between the younger girls and the older women, not just in

terms of sharing responsibilities in the home, but also of changing norms of sexuality. Though I had only one focus group discussion on caste and gender with women from Urs colony and Ragigudda slums, I spent time, and had conversations, with individual women and adolescent girls who were part of the Chaitanya Yuvakiyara Sangha (CYS), in Ragigudda and Urs colony.

I made a lasting relationship through the course of the fieldwork with the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM). Sister Celia, herself not a domestic worker, started the Bangalore chapter of the larger Domestic Workers' Movement (DWM). As the group emerged from one woman's vision and not from the domestic workers themselves, the claims to 'movement-status' seem exaggerated but give a sense of the purpose of the group. With help from Sr. Celia and other activist friends, it was here that I conducted 12 focus group discussions in the slums of Doddkunte and Karianapalya and in the office of the KDWM (see Appendix A). It was through these group interviews that I established a relationship with one of the nascent groups in the movement. Most of the women in this group were related to each other and living in the Karianapalya slum in Lingarajpuram area of Bangalore. All of the women in Karianapalya were *madiga* women doing domestic work. The domestic women workers at Doddkunte were dalit Christian and *madiga*. At the KDWM, the method that I used to gain access to the women was through the self-help groups that were already set up by the organisations working with the women.

As I have already suggested, there were so many dalit groups that I only learnt about when I returned for my field work. While I was aware of the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi (DSS) and its many splinters, through the course of the field work, I learnt about,



and met members of, several other groups such as the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS - Group for the Struggle for Reservations for Madigas), the Dalit Christian Federation (DCF), the Dalit Kranti Dal (Dalit Revolution Group), the Guttuge Pourakarmika Sangha (Group for the Contract Street Cleaners), the National Federation for Dalit Human Rights (NFDHR), Women's Voice, Bahujan Student Federation (BSF) as well as with the DMC.

However, there is one pattern that is discernible as my field work progressed. I was meeting and interacting with far more dalit and slum based groups than with women's groups. While I met and interacted with women's groups such as Vimochana, Manasa and HHS, these interactions did not necessarily translate into 'research material' in terms of the research questions that were formulated during the process of research.

### ***Methodological and Ethical Issues***

#### ***Questions of Location, Access and Legitimacy***

As a participant and a feminist researcher, there was (and continues to be) a contradiction in terms of the different worlds I inhabited. My own social location as a *lingayat*, middle class woman seemed so much in contrast with the aspirations and context that my identity as a feminist activist researcher accorded me. The difference in terms of food, of the conditions within which I lived, contrasted starkly with that of the women I met in the course of my *avatar* as a feminist researcher. The context of my field work with women domestic workers especially, was in sharp conflict with my social location as a person who benefited from similar work in my own home. It was difficult to reconcile myself to these contradictions, to the unequal

power relations that my location implicated me in. My social location also hindered my access to groups very early on.

I first met the DMC in the early parts of my pilot study, at a workshop they conducted in their offices in Bannerghatta in the outskirts of Bangalore. When I learnt that the DMC was conducting a workshop on dalit issues over a week, I asked whether I could be a part of the session. The DMC stipulated that I would have to stay on overnight if I were to take part, since that is what each of the participants were doing. Understandably, they did not want someone flitting in and out of something that was clearly important to them. This however put me in direct conflict with my family (with whom I was staying), who were generally wary of having me stay overnight anywhere, forget in a 'strange' place. It meant a process of negotiation with the DMC (apart from the continuing one with my family) to suggest that my sincerity to the issues that were close to my heart was not to be judged by the circumstances that I found myself in. While it took the DMC a while before they accepted me into their circle, it made me vigilant to the expectations, not just of my sincerity and therefore credibility, but also of the legitimacy of what constituted 'proper' research in the eyes of my 'respondents'. The question of proving my credibility was to crop up time and again through the course of my field work. One of the ways through which the women at KDWM assessed me was through offering me water, to judge whether or not I would eat/drink in their homes. Others would judge by whether or not I was interested in issues 'outside' the frame of my fieldwork; would I for instance, take a trip to Sindhanur to learn about dalit women's lives there?



The 'expectations' on the part of my respondents were to be circumscribed, however, by my own investment in dalit and gendered politics. Therefore, while on the one hand my networking and the processes of gaining the trust of my respondents took the time that it did (my first focus group discussion was in August 2001), it was also a process where I was invested in the concerns of the groups I was networking with.

There were many times though, when I felt that there was a conflict between my 'activist' and 'research' personas because it seemed like my motives were not altruistic enough. Whilst I felt that documenting and taping material almost always seemed intrusive, I would suggest that the conflict was part of a larger one: between theory and practice, between academia and activism. The purported cerebral character of theory and academia was posited against the hard nosed everyday 'materiality' of activism. This is something that I was, and continue to be (in shifting degrees of conciliation), personally conflicted with, and it was something that my respondents also indicated to me in varying degrees. While some groups such as the DMC were not averse to 'theorising', because of their own investment in an evolving theory of dalit-hood, others, such as Parthasarathy of MRHS, while himself undertaking a research on the numbers of *madiga* people in the university of Bangalore, were more uncomfortable with the purported 'esoteric' nature of research.

Still further, my transitory status - accentuated and made manifold because my research was being conducted from a foreign university - was a continuous cause for the interrogation of my involvement in dalit politics on the part of my respondents. Why did I go abroad to study? Would I return home after I completed the research?

What would I do with the findings of the research? These very legitimate and difficult questions hit at the heart of the ethics of the research. While there are no easy answers to any of these questions, my legitimacy and that of the research with nearly all the groups rested on my involvement, my immersion, my breathing the air of dalit politics.

While my involvement with Samvada accorded me the much needed 'insider' access, it sometimes threw up dilemmas as well. Most of the groups that I interacted with set up another hierarchy between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and movements. There were various criteria on which this was set up: funding, the larger purposes of the group, the reach of the group in galvanising and offering support to communities, and some deeply held conviction about what constituted 'real' work amongst communities. I was at times outside and at other times inside this divide. For instance, my involvement with Samvada implicated me sometimes as an outsider (for some of the 'movement' activists) and at other times, my transitory status meant I was seen as having larger purposes than the particular politics that Samvada was engaged in.

Age served as another hindrance to my field work was age and being 'young' meant not being taken seriously for a long time. Of course, I later realised that some of the women that I met and worked with were my age, only they had far more responsibilities, they were married and had children to take care of and families to feed and therefore, they perceived themselves as older. This alerted me to the issue that responsibility and particular forms of heterosexuality (marriage and all the



attendant ‘responsibilities’ of children and ‘family’), not only accorded legitimacy, but also structured many of the women’s lives.

The biggest constraint, however, was the near-impossibility of the use of a dictaphone in meetings and sessions that I attended and conducted. Many times, even the use of a pad and pen seemed intrusive. Therefore, throughout the fieldwork, except in interviews with some people with whom I had established a close relationship, I had to rely on notes made after the sessions. This reliance on memory makes the sessions seem less rich than they actually were.

There were other constraints to contend with through the course of the field work and later through the processes of analysis. The Kannada that I speak has its roots in North Karnataka and is different from that spoken in Bangalore, but more particularly, it is a medley of spoken Kannada, difficult to understand by anybody’s standards. This proved difficult, especially at focus group discussions and interviews. Since I have been formally taught Kannada only at the most basic levels, translating conceptual terms was something I had to learn on the job. Conversations were much easier to deal with, though some of the Kannada spoken, especially by the women in slums was difficult for me to comprehend, as accents are different amongst different castes and classes of Kannada speaking people in Bangalore. Some of the women domestic workers were Tamil speakers, and while I have a rudimentary knowledge of Tamil, I had to rely on the translations of activist friends to fully engage with the women.

During the transcribing stage of the thesis, language and issues of translation were to crop up time and again, especially in getting the full import of the terms that the respondents used. Though I had a Kannada-English dictionary at hand, the meanings of some of the terms seemed bland in translation, masking the sentiment with which the women and men spoke. Susie Tharu analyses the (higher, purer) linguistic air of translation and suggests that a translation is concerned more with essaying a mode of signification than with transferring meaning or information (1996). While I have translated most of the interviews verbatim, the meanings that I have chosen to assign from a range of meanings are ones that I assessed to be closest to the sentiment of the respondents.

Related to the question of translation are the ways in which I have analysed the interviews. Upendra Baxi (1999) poses the question of narrative integrity in the many 'markets' of human suffering. Using the instance of Kamla, a woman who was bought and sold in sexual trade three times in Madhya Pradesh in 1981, he interrogates the ways in which Kamla circulates and re-circulates as a 'commodity', not just in the phallic markets of civil society but also in the avant-garde markets of creative sensibility and investigative journalism; and in the market of human rights and of judicial activism (1999: 275-290). I can only hope that my investment in the stories of my respondents allows for a narrative integrity that stays true to the spirit in which they were told: a call for a change in the status quo.

### *Transformation of the Research Questions*

It was through the process of the research that my research questions came to be revised and re-formulated. They became more specific and amenable to research. In



my initial research design I thought that the ‘experiences of dalit women living in the slums of Bangalore’ in terms of the work that they did in the ‘public’ sphere as well as in their homes, the constructions of their sexuality and their experiences of violence, would offer insights into their lives. However, the underlying assumptions that these experiences would account for the *differences* between women of different castes and classes seemed to cloud my research questions. Through the process of the field work, I learnt to analyse this differently. That *dalit* identity was invoked differently by different groups, gave me the insight into my first research question.

1. How is the label dalit applied to which specific groups, in what ways and to what effects? How do the groups use the label? Do they have any stakes in claiming or even disclaiming dalit identity?

There was a shift in perspective from ‘essential difference’ questions to questions of labelling, both in terms of self-identification as well as identification by others. This shift was accessed through an analyses of the discourses used (see ‘methods of analysis’, below). The shift led to further questions on the varying stakes or investments groups or individuals had with these labels.

‘Untouchability’ as a symbolic frame of reference was repeatedly invoked by many of my respondents in speaking of the dalit condition. Therefore, it became important to interrogate the politics of untouchability in terms of the ways in which it was understood, its gendered manifestations and its specific relation to the city:

2. How is untouchability and its relationship with gender eroded, re-shaped and reproduced within the context of the city? What are the strategies that are deployed to resist, disrupt and subvert it? How successful are these strategies, and what problems do they throw up?

The initial research questions on the experiences of labour of dalit women were to be transformed, to centre on the issues surrounding paid and unpaid domestic work that many of the respondents were engaged in. Further, the research question on the experiences of sexuality of dalit women was to be modestly transformed to address the discourses on the representations of dalit women in relation to particular forms of heterosexuality and questions on the menstrual practices of dalit women.

3. In relation to dalit women, how is the division of labour between caste communities and the sexual division of labour amongst dalit communities in Bangalore configured? What are the strategies employed to transform these relationships? What dilemmas do they throw up for dalit and feminist politics?

### *The Field of the PhD*

While the processes of networking and meeting groups in Bangalore are an integral aspect of the 'field' of my research, I also want to suggest that there were several events that framed the field work in terms of the focus of dalit activism at the time that I was there. I partook in these activities and events by attending meetings, rallies as well as conferences.

Dalit politics in July-August 2001, centred around the 'UN Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and other related discrimination'. Almost all dalit debates and rhetoric at this time centred around whether caste could be analysed in terms of race and whether or not it should be included for discussion at the conference. Another 'event' was the violent 'naked parade' of a dalit woman in Bellary district of North Karnataka at the end of August 2001 (see Deccan Herald and Times of India reports between August 28-Sept 15 2001). The public outrage at the incident was



complicated by the fact that the men who attacked her belonged to a Scheduled tribe/adivasi community, thereby disturbing an already fragile coalition.

Jansahayog and CIVIC, two local NGOs, were involved in a joint exercise to produce a socio-economic survey conducted in 139 Bangalore Mahanagara Palike slums. The report of the survey was to come out only at the end of 2003. There were several rallies by the KDWM and other social groups on the inclusion of 'domestic work' as work in the impending labour legislation, seeking to regulate the informal sector. Unfortunately, by the latest reports, domestic work was not included as work in the labour legislation on the informal sector. The Guttuge Pourakarmika Sangha (Contract Street Cleaners Group) were, and continue to be, involved in several rallies and meetings with the BMP (Bangalore Mahanagara Palike - Bangalore City Corporation) around questions of a minimum wage and conditions of work of the contract street cleaners of Bangalore city.

Between September 29 and October 1 2001, the Hyderabad Women's Collective and the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies organised a South Indian Young Feminists' Conference at which the dalit women's presence was strong. There was a lot of debate generated around the issue of women's movements cognisance of the caste question, and there were many interesting perspectives on dalit women's sexualities. A seminar on the 'Status of Dalit Women' was organised by the Women's Cell of Bangalore University in February, 2002, where questions on the relation of the dalit and women's movements were raised.

Apart from a workshop at Pappenayakanahalli in North Karnataka, which focussed on the issues of caste and gender and was organised by Samvada, I attended another workshop on gender in Bende Bommasandra on the outskirts of Bangalore, with the Dalit Kranti Chaluvalli (Dalit Revolution Movement).

While these were the 'events' that framed the field of the PhD, I have already suggested that there were several groups that also formed the field of the research. While these groups worked in and around Bangalore, I met the women at KDWM several times in the slums in which they lived. Therefore, if there is a physical space that is the field of the research, it was the two slums that I frequented through the course of the field work. Both the slums, Doddkunte and Karianpalya, are near Lingarajpuram, an eastern suburb of Bangalore. This part of the city follows the visible patterns of the east-west divide of Bangalore (see Chapter 3). These areas in the east have a more 'cosmopolitan' air. There are far more Tamil speaking communities living in the east and the area itself is marked in parts, by graffiti that calls for the installation of the statue of the Tamil poet, Thiruvalluvar.

Spatially, Doddkunte slum is much bigger than Karianpalya. When I visited the slum with Sr. Celia, we would visit different parts of the slum at different times. While it was extremely difficult to ascertain the numbers as well as the composition of the people living in the slums, they were definitely about a few thousand people living in Doddkunte slum. I met and interacted with two groups of domestic workers in this slum, one consisting of dalit Christian, Tamil speaking women; and the other consisting of *madiga*, Kannada speaking women, most of whom were related with each other. In fact, in one lane of the slum, about six sisters resided next to each



other with their families. There was a similar pattern with Karianapalaya, which was much smaller, with a population of only a few hundred. The residents were mostly *madiga* and Kannada speaking and all the women domestic workers that I met either knew each other or were related to one another.

The conditions of living in these two slums were not that different from one another: water was available on one day of the week in both slums, the residents had to pay for electric lines to be pulled into their homes and many of the homes were one-roomed, with varying degrees of permanence in structure. The occasional house had a space designated as a toilet-cum-bathroom (in Doddkunte, there were about four public toilets; in Karianpalya, there were none). Both Doddkunte and Karianpalya had *arrack* and condiment shops serving the residents. The women were the ones who cleaned the ‘public’ spaces of the slum.

### ***Groups Chosen and Rationale***

The groups that I chose to analyse are the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvali (Dalit and Women’s Movement - DMC), Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (the Group for the Struggle of Reservations for Madiga People - MRHS) and the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM). Although most of the other groups also informed my research in myriad ways, I examine these particular groups, because I met and spent much of my time with the members of these groups through the course of the research. They also provided particular insights into the dalit condition in the city, in terms of the different meanings of the term ‘dalit’ that each of them invokes, as well as the varying stakes that they have in holding onto dalit identity.

At the outset, I would like to make some comments about the groups themselves, as well as how I have used the material about and from each of these groups. None of the groups have an ambit that is 'Bangalore-specific', either conceptually or physically. They have grown out of certain political concerns that cannot be limited to the physical space of Bangalore. However, all of them are involved in, and shape the dalit political discourse *in* Bangalore. Through the two analytical chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, I will show how they shape dalit politics in Bangalore, even as they engage in political struggles which have much wider implications.

I want to also make clear that there is not necessarily a coherence-as-a-group amongst each of the groups on every issue relating to dalit politics. And when there is unity, the basis of this unity reflects at times the purpose of the group, and at other times, the processes that the group has been through. I will bring out all of these tensions and the possible reasons for them in my two analytical chapters.

Most of my material on the MRHS is from members who are also part of other dalit groups, such as the pourakarmika sangha (City Workers' Group – group involved with the contract street cleaners) and the Dalit Kranti Dal (Dalit Revolution Group). They therefore have a particular stake in both the politics of the MRHS and dalit politics in general. It is important to note that I have not spoken to any woman member of MRHS in Bangalore. There is a serious gap in the number of women active in a public political level. What I mean by this, is that while women will come to marches and take active part at the level of slum political discourse, partaking in the *madiga* politics or even for that matter, dalit politics at a public level is uncommon.



The Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS) is a group that started about four years ago (1999/2000), fighting specifically for proportional reservations in education and government jobs amongst the castes that are entitled to reservations. The mandate of the group is limited to reservation politics, but hints at the larger issue of the differences between the two 'untouchable' castes, *madiga* and *holeya*. I met four members of the MRHS: Parthasarathy, Keshavmurthy, Ganganna and Chandru. Keshavmurthy was also General Secretary of the Guttuge Pourakarmikara Sangha.

The Guttuge Pourakarmika (Contract Labourers) struggle has stemmed out of the need to address issues of the contract labourers working with the Bangalore Municipal Corporation (the government body responsible for the cleanliness of the city), though not directly employed by them. About 90% of the work force is made of women from the lower castes. The struggle centres around improving the working conditions of the labourers as well as seeking work security. The underlying rhetoric of the group centres around the political economy of caste and the real and symbolic violence associated with such an economy.

The Dalit Kranti Dal is a group that formed in 1997/98 around questions of labour and the dalit identity in the Peenya industrial estate of Bangalore. Essentially starting out as a group addressing questions around the conditions of dalit people living in slums, it is now working on dalit workers' rights in the industrial estate. I met Ganganna, also of the MRHS, who is a co-founder of the group.

The Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvali (DMC) is a young group of 12-14 people of different castes, mostly *vadda* and *holeya*, based in Bannerghatta in Bangalore. They have started gaining prominence in dalit politics in Bangalore over the past three to four years. One member of the group was part of the dalit delegation that went to represent the interests of the dalit community at the Durban conference, a defining moment for the group. I met all of the members of the group through the course of the field work. Amongst this group, I interacted most with Chenappa, the ideologue and founder-member of the group and with Yashoda, Sudha, Rani, Lakshmamma, Chandru, Kasim and Jayaram.

The Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM) is a nascent group that has not followed the patterns of the other groups in terms of the ways in which it came into existence. While it attempts to mould itself into a group of and for domestic workers, it is not a group that has been formed by the domestic workers themselves. Having taken shape as a group interested in working with domestic workers, the politics and composition of the group are fairly different from the others. There is a tension, which I shall bring out in the chapters that follow, between the self-perceptions and aspirations of the domestic workers themselves and the organising principles of the group, set out by the Domestic Workers Movement (DWM) of which the KDWM is a sister body. I met and interacted with about 25 women at Doddkunte and Karianpalya slums who worked as domestic workers. Apart from Sr. Celia, who is not a domestic worker herself, but who organises the group, I also came to know in particular Laksmamma, Eshwarmma, Narsamma, Anusuyamma, Bali, Chitra, Balamma, Anjalie, Sagai Mary, Mani, Irudaya Mary, Josephine and Mary.

### *Samples Obtained*

Although I met many of the respondents during rallies, conferences and meetings, I formally conducted 3 focus group discussions/group interviews with members of the DMC, 12 focus group discussions with the women at the KDWM, one interview with Sr. Celia of the KDWM and 4 interviews with members of the MRHS (Parthasarathy, Keshavmurthy, Ganganna and Chandra). The dates of the interviews, group and individual, and the topics of the discussions are available in Appendix A. However, of this I taped three group discussions with the DMC, two with the KDWM and all of the interviews, because of the difficulties mentioned above. Since the method of analysis I use is discourse analysis (see concepts and methods of analysis, below), these conversations tend to dominate Chapters 4 and 5. However, the information that has informed the research is much wider and this is indicated as I go along.

### **Processes of Production: Conceptual and Analytical Tools**

The process of conceptualising a framework to articulate the tensions in accounting for a dalit feminist politics in the city has been an extremely difficult one. The difficulty has centred around *how* one is to deal with intersecting identities: gender, caste, class, territory, religion, race and the famously embarrassed etc, make the conception of a dalit feminist politics rife with the risk of essentialisms as well as brimming with transformative potential and vision. Implicated in this difficulty are the usefulness of ‘difference’ as a conceptual and methodological tool, and the dichotomies between caste and class, especially in the context of the city (see Chapter 1). Also implicated are the politics of location, representation and experience, which lead to the very heart of feminist praxis: the subject of feminism,



the categories of 'woman/women'. The legitimate questions of 'What are the specific experiences of dalit women? How can their experiences be represented and who can represent their experiences?' get very difficult indeed when we ask whether or not the categories of 'dalit', 'women' and 'experience' themselves are stable.

In this section I am interested in attending to these issues with two very specific purposes. The first, to illuminate the process through which I arrived at a conceptual framework in order to account for a dalit feminist politics, and the second, to elucidate the substantive aspects of this framework. Part of elaborating on this process is to illustrate just how difficult, dangerous and shaky theorising on 'difference' can be, even as it forms the basis of feminist, as well as a dalit feminist politics.

Therefore, I start this section with literature that seeks to clear the theoretical space for a dalit feminist politics in terms of 'difference'. I analyse this literature in terms of their categorisations of experience, location and representation. Through this process I illuminate the specific dangers in a politics of difference. While I suggest that it is imperative to be critical of 'difference speak', I also think it is important, as black, lesbian, 'third world' and dalit feminists have done, to hold onto the analytical moves in feminist theorising that expose the assumptions in the presentation of the category 'woman' as constitutive of a generic reality. Therefore, it is imperative to make distinctions in conceptions of 'difference' and assess the usefulness of each for a dalit feminist theory<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See Fraser (1997a: 203-204), where she differentiates between four attitudes towards difference in her call for a critical theory of recognition.

I suggest that a dalit feminist standpoint theory, as elaborated by Sharmila Rege (1998, 2000), is useful as an analytical tool in the ways in which it centres dalit women. I also suggest, that while Rege's framework of a dalit feminist standpoint is useful for critiquing a politics of difference, it is also important to provide analytical tools that not only centre dalit women, but also combine a politics of recognition with a politics of distribution. For this, I draw on Nancy Fraser's integrated theory of perspectival dualism (1997a, 1999, 2000, 2001).

### ***Dalit Feminist Theory: Difference vs. Standpoint Feminism?***

In this section, I examine and analyse the literature that seeks to clear the theoretical space for a dalit feminist politics by employing the concept of 'difference'. I focus on these texts partly because of the prominence that 'difference' has in accounts that characterise the shifts in feminist theorising, which have come to centre around the intersection of identities<sup>5</sup>. Further, the concept of 'difference' consumed much of my initial attempts to work out a framework of analysis because it implicated my location as a middle class, *lingayat* woman researcher, interested in the specificity of a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore.

However, as I have suggested before and will examine in greater detail, there are several difficulties with an analysis that centres around difference. I will examine the elaboration of a dalit feminist standpoint to analyse whether or not it surmounts these difficulties. Thereafter, I will examine the criticisms laid against a dalit feminist standpoint. These centre around the purported dichotomisation of cultural and economic injustices by a dalit feminist politics. This, I suggest can be dealt with by addressing this dichotomisation head on.

### *Difference in Dalit Feminist Politics*

The concept of 'difference' has loomed large in recent debates about a dalit feminist theory (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Rao, 1999). In his paper entitled 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' (1995), Gopal Guru opened the debate on the use of 'difference' for a dalit feminist politics<sup>6</sup> by bringing into sharp focus the assumptions behind dalit women's claim to talk differently. In his paper, Guru draws from the formation of the National Federation for Dalit Women in the August of 1995 to suggest that the independent and autonomous organisation of dalit women was a consequence, amongst other things, of the increasing feminist investment in difference:

In a situation, where the organisation of politics around difference has become a major feature of feminist politics, the organisation of dalit women around the notion of difference is bound to be a logical outcome. (Guru, 1995: 2548)

Guru elaborates on this claim for dalit women to talk differently in the specific terms of differential experience, social location and questions of representation. This claim, he suggests, is based on the 'differential experience' of dalit women as witnessed by the contradictions between dominant caste, upper class women, as well as the patriarchal domination within dalit communities. Also, he makes the case that feminist, dalit, peasant and eco-feminist politics do not represent the interests of dalit women. In Guru's assessment of the claim of dalit women to speak differently, he centres 'differential experience'; however, this 'naked' category of experience is also borne out by the exclusion of dalit women, both physically and theoretically, in

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 1 in the section on the 'Difference as Paradigmatic' (above).

<sup>6</sup> Following the publication of the article, a series of discussions around Guru's paper were organised in Pune by different feminist groups. A two-day seminar on the same was organised by the centre for research and documentation on women in June 1996 (See Rege, 1998: WS-44). Still further, it spurred Rege herself to contribute to the debate on the dalit women's claim to talk differently; her two articles in 1998 and 2000 start with the concept of difference and move onto an elaboration of her dalit feminist standpoint, which I shall analyse later in the section.



various political formations. Therefore, he argues that dalit women have a differential experience of rape (1995: 2548); that they were not represented by the populism of certain peasant struggles (1995: 2549); that they did not find common cause with other peasant and eco-feminist movements that sought to naturalise their poor living conditions; that they consider feminist theory developed by non-dalit women as un-authentic; and that they are marginalised both politically and culturally by dalit men (1995: 2549).

Having fore-grounded differential experience and the exclusion of dalit women from the representative interests of certain groups, he then gets to the heart of the legitimacy of the dalit women's claim to talk differently. He suggests that the claim rests on the assumption that 'the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged positions grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others' which 'makes the claim of dalit women to speak on behalf of dalit women automatically valid'<sup>7</sup> (1995: 2549).

However, Guru disrupts the unity of the claim to speak differently by arguing that this claim rests on the stability of the social location of the speaker (1995: 2549). In other words, Guru allows for the space to interrogate the stability of categories such as dalit, by focusing on the (changing and diverse) social location of the speaker and her 'representative' potential. This destabilises the dalit feminist claim to talk

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<sup>7</sup> In making this assertion, Guru draws on a rich tradition of Marxist standpoint epistemology which finds its classical exposition in Lukacs' analysis of working class consciousness. In his book on class consciousness (2000), Lukacs elaborates on working class consciousness in terms of the social position of the disadvantaged as providing the basis for knowledge claims. The argument that he makes is that the working class is the only class that *must* know the 'objective truth' about social reality, because they are the only class whose political interests *require* full knowledge.

differently. Guru, as Anupama Rao suggests, is wary of the ways in which the speaking of dalit women could run the risk of reifying caste (1999: 235).

I want to suggest that Guru's analysis of dalit women's claim to speak differently elucidates the difficulties inherent in a politics that is framed by difference. These difficulties centre around the problematic ways in which experience and representation are understood when accounting for this difference. While it is the power relations between different women that are at the heart of Guru's emphasis on social location<sup>8</sup>, he allows for certain moves by framing his argument in terms of difference. This is especially so when he talks about 'different experience' without demarcating whether or not it implicates a politics of exclusion, or some naked category of experience. For instance, while his argument that the violence of rape is *different* for dalit women can be read to implicate both a politics of exclusion by feminist groups in accounting for this difference and the account that dalit women have a *different* experience, I suggest that there is a risk of over-determining the *content* of this experience because of the ways in which the debate is framed by 'difference'. Do either account for the social relations that produce this 'difference'? Does the language of difference offer an explanation of the experience? Or does it only open another can of worms: is difference the premise or that which is sought to be explained?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> More recently, Guru has talked about the problems of representation in relation to the Durban conference (2001). At the heart of Guru's argument (also see Guru and Geetha, no date) is an analysis of knowledge production around the subject of dalit people, which he characterises in terms of the theoretical *brahmin* and the empirical *shudra*. Here it seems that Guru is wary of over-determining empiricism, as well as the processes of knowledge production, where theory remains the domain of the *brahmin*. In this section, however, I speak specifically of the possibilities that exist with a difference speak that takes experience-as-fact, as the basis for a dalit feminist politics (as Guru seems to do in *some* instances) not as that which has to be explained and analysed to produce a meaningful dalit feminist politics.

<sup>9</sup> See Sara Suleri's excellent critique of what she suggests is the iconic status given to racially encoded, postcolonial feminism. She argues that the desire to grant (and claim) authenticity to (by) the



Anupama Rao is conscious of these dangers when she talks of the hijacking of the discourse of difference:

Instead speaking differently allows one to affirm and reaffirm the already-constructed differences (i.e. dalit women experience more sexual harassment, dalit women suffer as workers as well as women, etc.). (Rao, 1999: 208)

However, Rao attributes this tendency toward essentialism to a regressive '*brahminical* feminism', characterised as 'the possibility of occupying a feminist position outside caste: the possibility of denying caste as a problem for gender' so much so that 'it refuses to allow for the active construction of a gendered caste self' (1999: 207, 208). This argument is similar to one that Vivek Dhareshwar makes about the 'secular' middle class self:

[...] caste has suffered from an excess of identification, but the burden of this excess has been borne by members of the 'lower caste'....the upper castes do not, or so they claim, experience caste; it is not a subjective reality for them; but they would admit to its facticity - an objective given. Whereas the semiotics of caste has been imposed on the lower castes. They are 'locked' into their identities. The repression or disavowal of caste by the secular self, then, has seemingly paradoxical consequence of producing an excess of identity for the lower castes. (Dhareshwar, 1995: 121)

I argue that the *brahminical* feminism that Rao speaks of, however, cannot interrogate its social location *through* an analysis of difference. This is because 'difference speak', as understood in terms of different subjective experiences, is complicit in the reification of identities. Further, it is not necessarily the 'secular' self alone that stands implicated in this reification, but the process of analysis that reifies

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ethnically constructed woman 'all too often takes its theoretical form in a will to subjectivity that claims a theoretical basis most clearly contravened by the process of its analysis' (1997: 338). Talk of 'different experience' (alternative realism, in Suleri's account) stands on the brink of reducing sexuality to the literal structure of the racial (and in this case, dalit) body (1997: 339). Also see Joan Scott's article 'Experience' (1992) where she argues, that while 'experience serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is unassailable', we have to be conscious that 'experience (should not be) the origin of our explanation but that which we want to explain' because 'what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested and therefore, always political' (1992: 37, 38).



dalit women as other, leading to questions such as ‘what are the contents of caste’?<sup>10</sup> I suggest that a politics of difference that does centre a gendered caste self, *also* allows for the essentialising of caste, gender as well as experience, when it takes difference as being self-explanatory, and not as that which has to be explained.

Therefore, the risk of essentialism exists in Guru’s account of dalit women’s claim to speak differently, because he does not necessarily demarcate between a discursive analysis of experience and an account of ‘naked authentic experience’. Also, Guru continues to centre difference; therefore, his analysis of experience and representation get tied up too tightly together. This is what then allows him to question whether some (middle class, educated) dalit women can represent the interests of other sections of dalit women, because are they not complicit in a politics of exclusion as well (1995: 2549).

### *Dalit Feminist Standpoint*

In this context, Sharmila Rege’s engaging paper entitled, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of “Difference” and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint’ (1998: WS-39 – WS-46) stands as a lone attempt in confronting and analysing the utility of the concept of difference for a dalit feminist theory. Rege starts her paper with the assertion that the concept of difference has limited political and analytical use<sup>11</sup>. Her paper then traces the processes through which ‘difference’ gained its current iconic status in feminist analyses through an interrogation of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism/poststructuralism. Resisting the inference that dalit women’s voices are another rendering of a ‘different voice’ amongst many, she

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<sup>10</sup>See the research process where I discuss the essentialising modes of my initial theorising (above).

situates her paper in a re-visioning of feminist politics through a dalit feminist standpoint methodology<sup>12</sup>. She argues against the plurality of 'difference' politics, because as she suggests, after the initial debates around the formation of autonomous dalit women's organisations amongst left and feminist organisations:

[...] the debates seemed to have come to rest, and the relative silence, and the apparent absence of a revisioning of feminist politics thereafter only suggests an ideological position of the multiple/plural feminist standpoints [...] the separate assertion by dalit women's organisations comes to be accepted as one more standpoint and within such a framework of 'difference'; issues of caste become the sole responsibility of dalit women's organisations. (1998: WS-39)

Instead Rege argues that we need a shift of focus from 'difference' and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression<sup>13</sup>. In her attempt to articulate a dalit feminist standpoint, she makes distinctions between a narrow 'identitarian' politics based difference and a difference that is historicised, or rooted in the 'long lived history of lived struggles' (Rege, 1998: WS-41 – WS-45). She does this by locating women in the non-*Brahmin* movement in Maharashtra through the counter-narratives of Jotiba Phule, Muktabai, Tarabai Shinde and Ambedkar. She then poses the question of why these voices are inaudible in the dalit and women's movements of the 1970s. According to her, this silence is because *brahminical* hierarchies are not/have not been interrogated from a gender perspective. Having identified the historical silence and exclusion, and wanting to avoid the 'narrow alley of direct experience based authenticity and narrow identity

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<sup>11</sup> See Maynard (1994a) where she makes a similar argument in the context of assessment of the utility of 'difference' for an analysis of race and gender (20).

<sup>12</sup> Rege draws on Marx, Lukacs as well as Nancy Hartsock in her account of dalit feminist standpoint epistemology (1998: WS-45). While Hartsock (1987) makes a similar argument to Lukacs' on working class consciousness in her analysis of feminist standpoint, Rege draws on her later papers that modify the analysis of the 'social location' of the oppressed by focussing on the shifting bases of this location as well as by suggesting that the subject of such knowledge is not fixed (see the later parts of this section).

<sup>13</sup> This finds replication once again in Maynard's analysis of the usefulness of difference for the analysis of race and gender (1994a: 20).



politics' (WS-45), Rege then makes several moves to argue for a dalit feminist standpoint.

Having already made the case that interrogating caste from a gendered perspective is in everyone's interest when she argues against multiple standpoints, Rege expands on the 'dalit women' of her dalit feminist standpoint:

[...] the subject/agent of dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i.e., that the category "dalit woman" is not homogenous [...] such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality- all construct each other [and therefore, that...] the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to interrogations and revisions. (1998: WS-45)

Still further, Rege suggests that as a dalit feminist standpoint emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women, and non-dalit feminists cannot speak as or for dalit women, they can re-invent themselves as dalit feminists, thereby transforming themselves as 'individual feminists' into 'oppositional and collective subjects' (1998: WS-45). In a later paper, she clarifies the representative potential of non-dalit women's speech about dalit women:

An internal critique does not call for non-dalit women to freeze into guilt or to celebrate an uncritical dalit womanism. Neither does it imply a submission to some "imagined authenticity of homogenised dalit women's voice", it means a recognition of connections of power that exist between women. It means speaking, not just "as one" or "for the other" but within and about the space between the "self" and the "other". (Rege, 2000: 493)

Rege therefore, sets up an interesting set of distinctions in her conceptions of difference, experience, representation, knowledge production and power relations. She argues against an identity based understanding of difference, which she characterises as engaged in 'naming difference' and 'authentic direct experience'. Instead, she locates this difference by historicising the 'experience' of dalit women in



terms of their lived histories. She argues that questions of representation (as implicated in a politics of difference) can and have led to situations where dalit feminist politics becomes a concern only for dalit women; therefore becoming a competing voice in a set of multiple voices. Arguing against such an eventuality, she suggests that dominant caste women have to interrogate their social locations in order to produce knowledge that is not exploitative. They can do so by centring the dalit woman as subject, in all knowledge production. This subject is multiple and heterogeneous, even contradictory, therefore constantly open to interrogation, as is a dalit feminist politics. While the 'practices and struggles' of dalit women continue to inform a dalit feminist standpoint for Rege, in this centring of dalit women she sees the possibility for a sharp focus on the intersection of structures such as caste, class, gender.

To analyse the moves that Rege makes, I would like to start by suggesting that she attempts to sieve through what is problematic about standpoint epistemology and the difference paradigm and retain what is useful from both. However, like Guru, she grants epistemic privilege to the dalit woman, by centring the struggles of dalit women and insisting that a dalit feminist standpoint is a more grounded form of knowledge. Where she sharply differs from Guru however, is in her demarcation of this epistemic privilege from questions of access to knowledge and the politics of representation. For Rege, all knowledge is enriched if dalit women are the subjects of enquiry. I will suggest that, while it is important to ground the power relations that operate in knowledge production by interrogating 'the space in between'<sup>14</sup>, and by centring the structures of caste, class and gender in knowledge production, where

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<sup>14</sup> This idea, Rege takes from Elspeth Probyn's 1993 work on gender in cultural studies (Rege, 2000: 493).

Rege flounders in arguing for a dalit feminist standpoint, not as analytical tool, but as epistemic knowledge base (see Hawksworth, 1999: 135-153).

Further, Rege, like Guru attempts to forestall the reification of identities by destabilising the subject of the dalit feminist standpoint. Unlike Guru however, Rege tries to locate the 'experiences' of dalit women by gleaning them from their excluded and silenced histories. In this she attempts to move away from questions of the authenticity of experience. However, I will suggest along with Joan Scott (1992), that while it is important to situate experience by historicising it, it is a discursive account of such experience that allows for an understanding of experience as something contested and that which is sought to be explained.

#### *The Dichotomisation of Culture and Economics in Dalit Feminist Standpoint?*

Chhaya Datar (1999: 2964-2968) takes issue with Rege's proposition for a dalit standpoint feminism on several counts. The overarching argument that she makes, is that a dalit feminist position, as it stands, cannot be a standpoint. According to Datar, only 'those who regenerate both natural and societal resources can claim a standpoint' (1999: 2964). For her, it is the eco-feminist trend which centres reproduction in all its three dimensions<sup>15</sup>, that can be called an alternative standpoint (1999: 2964, 2968). She suggests that the dalit women's movement, with its focus on a cultural revolt against *brahminical* symbols, cannot aspire to a revisioning of

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<sup>15</sup> These are: the 'daily reproductive activities to service human labour, physical reproduction which includes production, and social relations for which socialisation of children in moulding their cultural identities becomes an essential activity' (1999: 2968). Datar further argues that, 'any standpoint which predicts emancipation based on processes of industrialisation which requires non-renewable energy resources on a large scale, and fast track development based on high-tech does undermine the value of reproduction and regeneration. Unless reproduction becomes a central concern of society and a lifestyle is geared around that we cannot say that paradigmatic change has been envisioned' (1999: 2968).



society without also talking of the 'materiality of the majority of dalit, marginalised women who lose their livelihoods because of environmental degradation' (1999: 2964). Datar, therefore, attempts to complicate the focus on culture, which she attributes to a dalit feminist standpoint, by implicating the *materiality* of the 'industrial, technological paradigm' (1999: 2964).

In a counter to Datar, Rege (2000: 492-495) clarifies some of her positions on dalit feminist standpoint. She suggests that there is no contradiction between the dalit feminist standpoint and a feminist environmentalist position which holds that 'the linkages between gender, caste and class, structure the organisation of production, reproduction and distribution - as also the effects of environment change on people' (2000: 492). She criticises the dichotomy between the material and cultural which equates the material to environmental degradation and *brahminism* to the cultural:

Brahmanical patriarchies and caste-specific patriarchies are material in their determination of the access to resources, the division of labour, the sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour [...] Further [...] endogamy also structures and maintains the redistribution of resources. Datar's contentions about anti-caste movement being cultural revolts is debatable for such a contention on one hand views brahmanism and the struggle against it as located in cultural symbols and over-looks the caste-based character of capital accumulation and labour and of reproduction in the broadest sense of the term. A dichotomisation of injustices into socio-economic and cultural [...] assumes a divide as if between a politics of redistribution and recognition. Such an opposition overlooks the fact that caste is cultural without ceasing to be material and a brahmanism in its production distribution and effect is economic. (2000: 493, 495)

What is at the heart of the contention between Rege and Datar, in terms of a providing a more encompassing standpoint, is a debate about whether or not a dalit standpoint feminism *can* account for economic injustices. Through this there is a tension set up between a politics of recognition and a politics of distribution in the question of whether or not a dalit standpoint feminism can account for both. This is rooted on the one hand, in the debate about the history of caste, class and feminist



movements and what specific injustices each of them is understood as addressing (see Chapter 1). On the other hand, it is related to *how* we are to deal with a politics of distribution and politics of recognition together, in this instance, for a dalit feminist politics.

In Rege's account, a division of labour, a sexual division of labour and a division of sexual labour are determined and regulated by *brahminical* patriarchy, caste-specific patriarchies and the principle of endogamy. I will argue that while a dalit standpoint feminism is better equipped to deal with the two faces of justice than a politics of difference, a bifocal analysis will not suffice (Fraser, '1997a: 189-205). To comprehend the ways in which 'caste is cultural without ceasing to be material', we have to address the cultural and economic aspects of caste head-on. Therefore, we have to analytically distinguish between the two types of (in)justice so that neither of them is subsumed by the other. Still further, it is important to historicise and contextualise the argument that Rege makes about the ways in which caste, gender and class inform and make each other (Fraser, 1998). To do this, Fraser provides a framework of perspectival dualism which she suggests, attends to the tensions between a politics of recognition and a politics of distribution by using culture and economics as *analytical* categories.

### ***A Framework for a Perspectival Dualism***

Nancy Fraser locates her framework of perspectival dualism in the United States, where she suggests progressive politics has been increasingly divided into two camps, proponents of a politics of recognition and proponents of a politics of redistribution (1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000, 2001). In such a context, she argues that

the struggles for recognition which centre a recognition of difference have been gaining ground in recent years, and that they tend to privilege cultural analysis<sup>16</sup>. To this end, she maps out the various ways in which equality-difference debates have played out in the feminist politics of the United States from the 1960s (1997a: 175-188).

It is not my intention to map out progressive politics in this way, in the context of India, though that might well be a useful project<sup>17</sup>. What I will argue, however, is that Nancy Fraser's interest in overcoming the splits between the social and the cultural left resonate in the caste-class debates in India, historically as well as conceptually (see Chapter 1). This is further evidenced by the Rege-Datar debate elaborated above. Therefore, if we are to provide a framework to analyse a dalit feminist politics, I suggest that a perspectival dualism is an incredibly useful way of analysing caste, class as well as gender, without relegating any of them substantively to either culture or economics. Still further, because her framework allows for an evaluation of a politics of recognition, 'differences', as understood for a politics of recognition, can be qualified and assessed for their usefulness. Her framework also allows us to acknowledge the conflicts between various strands of politics of

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<sup>16</sup> Diane Coole makes a similar argument to Fraser in her article entitled *Is class a difference that makes a difference?* (1996: 17-25). She argues, like Fraser does, that there has been a hegemonic shift in feminism towards questions of identity at the expense of economic analysis. However she suggests that to account for economic inequalities, we have to 'consider whether class represents a unique difference which requires its own discursive paraphernalia, or whether discourses of difference themselves need transforming so they can accommodate it' (1996: 24). However, there are many critics of this analysis of a split between the 'social and the cultural left'. See Walby (2001), Butler (1998) and Young (1997).

<sup>17</sup> A fairly recent issue of the journal *Seminar* (December, 1999) obliquely analyses the politics of recognition and distribution in India through an interrogation of 'multiculturalism' and diversity. See especially, Sangari (1999), Joseph, S (1999) and Chandoke (1999). In the context of Britain see Anne Phillips (1997: 143-153) who suggests that political developments in Britain are less evidently preoccupied with struggles for group recognition. However, she also argues that this does not mean that there has not been a displacement of the economic.



distribution and recognition and to clarify the dilemmas that arise when we attempt to account for both simultaneously. I start with an elaboration of the framework.

### *Culture and Economics as Analytical Categories*

In her essay entitled, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?' (1997a: 11-39), Fraser sets out her framework for a perspectival dualism in very clear terms<sup>18</sup>. She starts with two *analytically* distinct conceptions of injustice. She characterises them as socio-economic injustice and cultural or symbolic injustice<sup>19</sup>. She further suggests that socio-economic injustice is rooted in the political-economic structure of society and cultural or symbolic injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. She proffers examples of both:

Examples [of socioeconomic injustice] include exploitation (having the fruits of one's labor appropriated for the benefits of others); economic marginalization (being confined to undesirable or poorly paid work or being denied access to income-generating labor altogether), and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living). Examples [of cultural or symbolic injustice] include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); non-recognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions). (Fraser, 1997a: 13, 14)

She further suggests that while these distinctions between injustices are analytical, in practice, i.e. substantively, they are deeply intertwined, resulting in 'a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination' (1997a: 15). However, continuing to

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<sup>18</sup> I lay out her framework of perspectival dualism from this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser later characterises cultural, symbolic injury as a *status* injury (See 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001). Christopher Zurn (2003) in his article entitled 'Identity or Status?', analyses this turn in Fraser's politics. He suggests that 'while Fraser is right to insist on a theory of recognition politics that can be integrated with a distinct theory of redistributive politics, she is wrong to claim that a critical theory of social justice requires a status model of recognition'. Also, Leonard Feldman suggests that what remains underdeveloped in Fraser's framework is the 'irreducible political dimension of justice' (2002: 410-440). I would argue along with Fraser, that the struggles for recognition and redistribution are also struggles for political parity (see especially 2000, 2001). I would argue further that the political dimensions of justice are not just directed at the state, but also at civil society (see Baxi's analysis of Ambedkar, 1995). The criticisms notwithstanding, for the purposes of this thesis, I



distinguish the two types of injustices analytically, she suggests that for each of the injustices, there are various remedies: for economic injustice, a political-economic restructuring, for cultural or symbolic injustice, cultural or symbolic change. While there are various ways in which these are sought to be achieved, she characterises the remedies for socioeconomic injustice as 'redistribution' and those for cultural injustice as 'recognition'. She continues to hold that these distinctions are analytical, whether or not they are *sui generis* concepts of justice.

Fraser then poses a dilemma. She suggests that claims for recognition tend to promote group differentiation, whereas claims for redistribution tend to call for the abolition of groups, i.e. they undermine such claims for differentiation. Thus, she suggests, 'the two claims stand in tension with each other, they can interfere with, or even work against each other' (1997a: 16). This she calls the redistribution-recognition dilemma. Having laid out this schematic, Fraser suggests that collectivities that face this redistribution-recognition dilemma are bivalent collectivities.

### *Bivalent collectivities*

Fraser elucidates on her account of bivalent collectivities through a thought experiment (1997a: 16- 23). The logic that she offers in this thought experiment is that we can analytically sift through where one can place the primary harm in each collectivity. Therefore, she suggests that in an ideal-typical situation, we could place the primary harm against the collectivity of despised sexualities to the cultural valuational structure, thereby proffering the remedy of recognition: revaluation and

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continue to centre the analytically distinct injustices of economic mal-distribution and cultural mis-recognition.

according positive recognition to gay and lesbian communities. Similarly, with the collectivity of class, we could trace the primary harm of economic injustice to the political economic structure, with the remedy being redistribution, probably resulting in the abolition of the collectivity itself. Fraser then complicates this picture by suggesting that with collectivities such as race and gender, we can trace co-primary harms, i.e. that we can trace the injustices suffered by these collectivities to both the political economic structure as well as the cultural valuational structure. Collectivities such as these, Fraser suggests are bivalent collectivities.

The argument that Fraser makes with her thought experiment is that we can assess the varying degrees to which the injustices of mal-distribution and mis-recognition accrue in various collectivities, in various contexts (1998). Also, she suggests that while most collectivities can be analysed as bivalent (1998), the degrees to which each type of injustice exists against a particular collectivity is to be determined (1999). In her essay on 'From Redistribution to Recognition?' (1997a) however, Fraser is also interested in analysing bivalent collectivities to pose the question of the redistribution-recognition dilemma as contained in these bivalent collectivities: 'How can feminists fight simultaneously to abolish differentiation and to valorize gender specificity?'; 'How can antiracists fight simultaneously to abolish "race" and to valorize the cultural specificity of subordinated racialized groups?' (1997a: 21, 22). To attend to this dilemma, Fraser elaborates on two broad approaches to both recognition and redistribution, which she calls 'affirmation' and 'transformation'.

### *A Framework of Transformation, Affirmation, Recognition and Redistribution*

Fraser makes certain simple assertions about her conceptions of affirmative as well as transformative accounts of justice. She suggests that affirmative remedies are those 'aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them' and transformative remedies are those 'aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework' (1997a: 23). She then links these approaches to justice to recognition and redistributive remedies, thereby providing a framework of justice claims in terms of affirmative redistribution, affirmation recognition, transformative redistribution and transformative recognition. She suggests that an affirmative redistribution corresponds to the liberal welfare state, an affirmative recognition to a mainstream multiculturalism, a transformative redistribution to socialism and a transformative recognition to deconstruction (1997a: 27).

She then suggests that within this matrix of justice claims, some are amenable to resolve the recognition-redistribution dilemma. Therefore, an affirmative recognition, along with an affirmative redistributive justice claim, are not necessarily in conflict. Similarly, transformative redistributive and transformative recognition claims are also well-equipped to deal with the recognition-redistribution dilemma. Fraser, in this context, also sets up the affirmation as a surface approach and transformation as a deep approach.

It has been suggested that in her later works, Fraser has moved away from such a strong 'illiberal approach' (Feldman, 2002; Zurn, 2003; also see Fraser, 2000, 2001).



Therefore, the appropriateness of a deconstructive approach to cultural injustice or a multiculturalist approach cannot be made theoretically and a priori (Feldman, 2002: 414). However, I argue that the normative content of the deconstructive and socialist approaches to the injustices of mis-recognition and mal-distribution serve as useful analytical tools to assess the directions different groups take in their claims for justice.

### *Concepts and Methods of Analysis*

In this part, I sketch out the concepts of research as well as the methods of analysis. The focus in this section is on how the concepts of research get translated into the process of analysis. Therefore, whilst I suggest that a dalit feminist standpoint is useful as an analytical tool because it centres dalit women, and a perspectival dualism is useful because it shatters the dichotomy between the cultural and economic aspects of injustice, the concept of the social group is helpful because it allows for an analysis of the varying investments and stakes that dalit groups have in the notion of dalithood. Still further, a discursive account of experience is a useful method of accounting for the experiences of dalit men and women in the city, because it allows for an understanding of experience as contested and always political.

### *Dalit Feminist Standpoint*

I argue along with Hawkesworth that standpoint positions are useful as analytical tools. Therefore, the dalit standpoint position as put forth by Rege, if understood in terms of an analytical tool, is effective in the ways in which it centres dalit women as well as the structures of caste, class and gender. I would prefer to argue that the issue

of multiple standpoints vs. dalit feminist standpoint is best left as an issue open to debate. Rege appears to agree with this when she argues that a dalit feminist standpoint is constantly open to revisions and interrogations.

### *Discourse Analysis*

Rege is interested in avoiding the pitfalls of the essentialisms of identities and experience. This is the reason why she constantly suggests that we can situate this 'different' experience. Still further, this is why she suggests that the subject of dalit women is heterogeneous, even contradictory. I consider that a discourse analysis allows for interrogating the *construction* of the identities of 'dalit' and 'women'. Therefore, a discursively constructed understanding of the identities of dalit women, along with a discursive account of experience, is a central concept in this thesis. In this context, I use the pragmatics model of discourse analysis offered by Fraser.

Fraser, in her essay, 'Structuralism or Pragmatics?' (1997a: 151-170) offers two distinct accounts of discourse analysis. She suggests that a pragmatics models of discourse insists on:

[...] the social context and social practice of communication, and they study a plurality of historically changing discursive sites and practices. As a result these approaches offer us the possibility of thinking of social identities as complex, changing, and discursively constructed [...] complex, shifting discursively constructed social identities provide an alternative to reified, essentialist conceptions of gender identity on the one hand, and to simple negations and dispersals of identity, on the other. They thus permit us to navigate safely between the twin shoals of essentialism and nominalism, between reifying women's social identities under stereotypes of femininity, on the one hand, and dissolving them into sheer nullity and oblivion, on the other. (1997a: 166)

### *Social Groups*

In her book entitled *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), Iris Marion Young makes the argument that 'oppression happens to social groups' (1990: 9). In setting



out the concept of a social group, she argues that groups are an expression of social relations, and that while group meanings partially constitute identities in terms of culture, social situation or history, these meanings could be forced upon them or forged by them or both. She uses Heidegger's concept of 'thrownness of identity' to suggest the ways in which one sometimes *finds oneself* as a member of a group. Young's argument is that groups come into being through a process of identification of affinity between members by others or by the members forging such identification themselves, or through both. While some members find themselves thrown into the group, the group identity itself is redefined by individuals confronting their oppression (1990: 42-48). I use this particular understanding of social groups to analyse the ways in which the dalit groups, men and women, associate and identify with the term *dalit* and the varying investments and stakes they have in denouncing or upholding dalit identity.

### *Caste, Class and Gender as Bivalent Collectivities*

Setting out Fraser's framework, as I have done before, is useful in complicating our understandings of the social groups of caste, class and gender for a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore. Fraser's theoretical framework may be used to iron out not just the theoretical and political impasse of examining difference, but also the difficult issues of how one is to theorise caste, gender and class together, especially in relation to the dichotomy of the cultural and economic aspects of injustice.

In her account, caste, class and gender can be understood as bivalent collectivities, i.e. the injustices in these groups can be traced to the co-primary harms of culture and economics. However, this is not an a priori assignation of where injustices are rooted. It has to be historicised and contextualised. Therefore, in these bivalent

groups, we can, in different instances, trace primary harms more or less to the analytical categories of either culture or economics.

By using culture and economics as analytical categories to be explored in uncovering injustice, the focus shifts away from specifying what injustice relates to what structure in the specific instance of a combined set of bivalent groups. Instead, the specificity of injustice can be unravelled by relating it to the analytical categories of culture and economics. I therefore use the analytical categories of culture and economics to identify different types of injustice and then crucially, to identify ways of transforming them, either through recognition or redistribution. I use this framework therefore, in terms of the different ways in which dalit groups, men and women, recognise various injustices and seek to redistributive economic resources. I also strive to point out contradictions, along with Fraser, in the different strategies that groups employ when they talk about the dalit condition in the city, in relation to various 'harms' that they identify. It is in this that we can situate various claims for justice.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have set out the processes of research and production of this thesis. I locate the initial research design of the project whilst indicating the ways in which the research was shaped and re-formulated as a consequence of my field work and my interaction with the respondents. The research questions came to be transformed and they shifted from an understanding of dalit identity in terms of essential difference, to an understanding of identity as contested by different groups, men and women, with different reasons and for varying purposes. Apart from the

contestations around dalit identity, an understanding of injustice in terms of untouchability was an overwhelming response from my respondents. Consequently, the second research question centres on the politics of untouchability: the ways in which it has been understood and contested in gendered terms as well as in the context of the city. A third research question locates the conditions of dalit women's lives in terms of the work that they do in the city, the sexual division of labour, as well as particular constructions of sexuality amongst dalit communities.

I identify the DMC, MRHS and the KDWM as the primary groups that I chose to analyse through the course of the field work. These groups allowed for a set of divergent understandings of dalit identity. As I shall show in Chapters 4 and 5, the DMC rejects the term 'dalit', the MRHS locates the specific injustice of a particular dalit community and the KDWM, as a group, does not take cognisance of the term 'dalit' at all. I also chose these groups because I got to know many members of these groups well, through the course of the field work.

The field work itself was a messy process, and a huge learning curve. The ethics of researching dalit women continue to pose difficult questions, especially given the distance (in more ways than one) in our social locations. I was however extremely lucky to work with an organisation that was already networked with a lot of dalit groups. My links with Samvada, coupled with my use of focus group discussions, helped make my research feminist, participatory action research.

In relation to the methodology of study, I locate the problems of a 'politics of difference' both in my initial theorising, as well as in a dalit feminist methodology



that centres difference. Dalit feminist standpoint methodology, on the other hand, centres dalit women's lives and contends with this politics of difference. However, it does not necessarily provide the analytical tools to contend with the dichotomy between cultural and economic aspects of injustice, especially in its specific manifestation in caste-class debates in India, elaborated in Chapter 1.

Nancy Fraser's framework allows for the use of culture and economics as analytical tools, providing for an integration of the social and the cultural left. Along with Fraser's perspectival dualism, I use throughout the thesis the analytical tools of a dalit feminist standpoint, an understanding of social groups and discourse analysis.

In the next chapter, I set out the context of the research, providing a situated history and context of the city of Bangalore and of dalit politics in Karnataka.

## Chapter 3

### The Context: The City of Bangalore and Dalit Politics

#### Introduction

Bangalore - *Bengaluru*, *Benda Kalu uru* (the town of boiled beans), the garden city, the silicon valley of India, the city of pubs, and for years, thought of as the quiet, sleepy retirement haven - is the economic, industrial and administrative capital of the southern state of Karnataka<sup>1</sup>. Located in the south-eastern corner of the state and at the heart of the South Deccan plateau, Bangalore is cited as the fastest growing city in Asia in the last decade (Aranya, 2003). According to the latest census count, it had a population of 5,686,844 of which the Bangalore municipal corporation<sup>2</sup> had a population of 4,292,223 (Census of India, 2001).

The history of Bangalore, as mired in the colonial engagement with the princely state of Mysore and thereafter as capital of the state of Karnataka, provides the context for this chapter. This is a history of Bangalore as a textile manufacturing centre in the eighteenth century with its intricate caste based division of labour and economy, as a divided city through the years of British reign and as a prolific 'public sector' city in the post-independence years, leading to its current stature as a city that has now

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendices B and C. With the re-organisation of the states on a linguistic basis in 1956, the state of Karnataka was carved out of the Madras and Bombay provinces, the princely states of Mysore, Hyderabad, Sandhur and Coorg (Jacob, 2000: 53).

<sup>2</sup> The Bangalore urban agglomeration is politically administered by the Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) or the Bangalore City Corporation (BCC) and various other municipal councils. However, there are other administrative units such as the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), Karnataka Slum Clearance Board (KSCB), Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC), Karnataka State Electricity Board (KEB) that erode and

purportedly overtaken the area of which it is the namesake as the real silicon valley of the world<sup>3</sup>. It is also a history that provides Bangalore with its particular caste and linguistic politics, its brand of Kannada nationalism, as well as its flavour as a 'cosmopolitan', 'middle class' city.

Janaki Nair has argued, in relation to the cosmopolitan character of Bangalore, that unlike other cities that are increasingly *becoming* more cosmopolitan, Bangalore's history *has been* one of a cosmopolitan city. She indicates that while Kannada speakers currently account for 34% of the population of the city<sup>4</sup> and some parts of the city have large segments of minority religious populations such as Christians and Muslims, identified with languages other than Kannada, the more recent migrants to the city are both primarily Kannada-speaking and Hindu. Therefore, a part of the history of Bangalore is of a heterogeneous city becoming more homogeneous, constituted as it is by an increasing audible chauvinistic Kannada nationalism (Nair, 1996a, 2000b, no date).

In the context of the city of Delhi, Usha Ramanathan (2003) has argued that in contrast to the 1980s when juridical discourse did not question the legitimacy of the claims of the urban poor, the 1990s have seen an intensifying illegitimation of their claims. That is to say that not only are the urban poor (especially poor migrants)

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usurp the powers of the municipalities (Aranya, 2003; Benjamin, 1999, 2000). The figures listed in this chapter are for the Bangalore urban agglomeration, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>3</sup> Satya Prakash Singh writing recently for the Economic Times says, 'The inevitable has happened. Bangalore, which grew under the shadow of America's Silicon Valley over the last two decades, has finally overtaken its parent. Today, Bangalore stands ahead of Bay Area, San Francisco and California, with a lead of 20,000 techies, while employing a total of 1.5 lakh (150,000) engineers' (2004). While much is made of Bangalore as an information technology hot spot, Janaki Nair has cautioned against the fervour it has generated by characterising the industry as allowing for 'techno coolie work' (2000a); and Benjamin (1999, 2000) has focussed on the divisions that the IT sector has spawned, in terms of issues of governance, poverty and economic enterprise.



considered *illegal* but they are also increasingly being constructed as *illegitimate* occupants of urban spaces. Partha Chatterjee (2003) has asserted that this is indicative of larger trends which he characterises as the Indian city 'becoming bourgeois'. The argument that he makes is that in the last decade or so, there has been a concerted effort to clean up the space of Indian cities by the government for its 'proper' citizens, which has been staunchly supported by citizen's groups and the judiciary. Further, he argues that there has been a suburbanisation of the middle class, even as public space is re-claimed for its 'proper' citizens. Still further, he suggests that there has been, in recent years, a proliferation of segregated and protected spaces for elite consumption.

Contributing to this debate, Janaki Nair points to the specificity of the experience of Bangalore. She argues that cities like Calcutta are still more humane compared to the 'beauty by banning' in Bangalore, because they continue to allow for certain democratic spaces. In Bangalore on the other hand, she argues, 'modernity' is successfully pitted *against* a 'plebeian democracy' (2003b). The particular political climate in Bangalore allows for what Nair (2003a) has characterised as the 'remembered and imagined city' which breeds a nostalgia amongst its middle classes for the city's 'quiet, peaceful and clean' past and sets the context for its futuristic vision as a modern city akin to Singapore with its high rises and its civic sense. It is this vision, fostered by policies of liberalisation and the increasingly influential IT industry, that encourages both the relative invisibility of its 'informal sector' and the concomitant 'mega-city' projects of flyovers, satellite townships, IT corridors and

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<sup>4</sup> They are followed by Tamil communities (25%) Urdu communities (19%) and Telugu communities (17%) (Nair, 1996a: 2810).

expressways in the name of infrastructure development and economic growth (Nair, 2000a, no date, 2003a; Benjamin, 1999, 2000).

However, the vision of Bangalore as a burgeoning IT city with its booming economy sits uneasily with the many 'Gulbarga' slums that dot the cityscape. The clean steel facades of a hi-tech city jostle for visual space with the thousands of poor who live on the margins of 'civil' society and of governmental policy, without easy access to basic facilities such as water, sanitation and housing. Again, while there are an increasing number of parastatal organisations affiliated to the IT sector, invoking their rights as stakeholders in the visions and directions of Bangalore, there are others: dalit communities, slum communities, ethnic and linguistic communities, who claim a space in the city. Further, while Bangalore is appealing to the sensibilities of a young middle class generation (Times of India, 2004), it also provides the space for the aspirations of the poor fleeing the drought-prone regions of the northern parts of Karnataka. And while there is an increasing investment in 'mega-city' projects such as the construction of flyovers, it has been documented that such 'infrastructural development' actually thwarts the entrepreneurial endeavours of communities that thrived on the thoroughfare that flyovers deprive them of (Benjamin, 2000).

It is in such a context that I want to situate dalit politics, which plays its part along with many other civil society organisations and movements, as a politics that is engaged in what Nair (no date) has termed 're-territorialising' the city. However, the story of dalit politics in Bangalore, and more importantly Karnataka, is not limited to the real and imagined landscape of the city. Therefore, while I will indicate the forms



in which dalit politics is present in the city, I will also show that there is no easy fit between dalit politics and the politics of the city. On the other hand, slum politics in Bangalore, which is also involved in a re-visioning of the city, crosses caste lines (even though there is a preponderance of dalit communities in the slums). Therefore, there is no easy fit either between slum politics and dalit politics.

Consequently, in this chapter I locate two things: the history and politics of the city as providing ways in which to understand the present context of its slums, and the history of dalit politics in Mysore and in Karnataka, to situate the ways in which it obtains within and beyond the city. This chapter is therefore divided in the following manner. The first section provides a brief history of the making of modern Bangalore, attempting to trace the economic, spatial, linguistic, caste and gendered divisions and politics from the eighteenth century leading up to independence.

In the next section, I lay out the growing stature of Bangalore as a hi-tech city by situating, *qua* Nair (2003a), the registers of the 'remembered and imagined city': remembered for its gardens and parks and clean, decongested past; and its aspirations to be a global city like Singapore. In this section I signal the ways in which the economic and administrative processes in Bangalore allow for a particular (contested) vision of Bangalore as a middle class city. I contrast this vision of Bangalore by locating the demographics of the city's slums. Here, I set out the profiles of the people who live in slums in terms of caste, gender, occupation, as well as the conditions in which they live.



In the section thereafter, I locate the politics of various groups in a process of, what Nair (no date) has termed, 're-territorialising' the space of the city, whether it be in terms of linguistic politics, slum politics or dalit politics. An intrinsic part of this re-visioning, in the particular context of slums, is an understanding of slums and low-income housing as productive units, mired in administrative and political claims-making (Benjamin: 1999, 2000, 2003). In relation to dalit politics, whilst I indicate the proliferation of various dalit organisations in Karnataka that are also based in Bangalore, I specifically focus on the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS), the largest mass dalit movement in Karnataka. I provide an analysis of the DSS, setting out the context that led to its formation, and the questions on which it dwelled in its formative years. I suggest that this process could be a useful means of assessing the ways in which dalit politics function in Bangalore today, and this is what I have attempted to do in my Chapters 4 and 5.

## **The Making of Modern Bangalore**

The Bangalore Gazetteer traces the earliest reference of 'Benguluru' to a Ganga inscription dated about 890 AD and suggests that it has been an inhabited place from at least 1000 BC. However, according to the Gazetteer, it was only in the sixteenth century (1537) that modern Bangalore was 'founded' by Kempegowda I with the erection of a mud fort (1990: 41, 3). By the end of the eighteenth century, when Francis Buchanan was commissioned by Arthur Wellesley to survey the newly acquired kingdom of Mysore, after the defeat of the indefatigable Tipu Sultan at the hands of the troops of Lord Cornwallis, Bangalore is recorded to have been a thriving manufacturing centre at the heart of which were the armament and textile industries<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See the Bangalore Gazetteer (1990: 76-81), Nair (1998: 15-17) and Pani, et al (1985: 1-13).

It has been argued that not only was Bangalore a flourishing inland entry port for Mysore and its hinterland of Channapatna, Doddaballapura and Kanakapura (Nair, 1998: 17, no date: 2), but also that it was 'virtually the commercial capital of Tipu Sultan's Mysore' (Pani et al, 1985: 1, 2).

Pani et al (1985), in their analysis of the impact of colonialism on the economic structure of Bangalore, trace its history as a textile manufacturing centre around which much of its commerce revolved in the eighteenth century. They argue that silk and superior cotton weaves made up a large part of the export manufacture while weaving, dyeing and printing accounted for import and the tertiary commerce in the city. At the heart of these commercial and manufacturing activities, they argue, lay an economy built on a caste-based division of labour. Taking from Buchanan's account, Pani et al suggest that within this intricate caste-based division of labour, the mercantile capital lay with castes such as the *nagarits*, the primary production system was taken up by weaving castes such as the *pattegaras*, *cuttery*, *shyanagaru* and *devangas*, (which were hierarchically ordered) who wove the silk weaves and superior cottons. The secondary systems of production were with castes such as the *billy mughas*, *samay salays*, who bore the risks of their produce in their dual roles as producers and marketers, and the tertiary system was with *togataru* and *holeyarus*, 'who went from house to house, collected small quantities of thread, wove it into cloth and were paid by piece rate' (1985: 3-6; Gazetteer, 1990: 266).

However, Pani et al also suggest that down the 'lower' rung of the weaving order, communities such as the *holeyarus* could not find subsistence on weaving alone. They had to hire themselves out as agricultural and general labourers. Also, as a sub-



system of the third category of producers, all women of non-*brahmin* castes bought cotton wool in small quantities and spun and sold yarn as well. Apart from the related industries of dyeing, printing, gunny manufacture and oil production, each of which had different economies of caste-based activity<sup>6</sup>, the allied industry of leathers was controlled and organised by the government. The tanning of leathers was undertaken, Pani et al tell us, on a relatively small scale by a caste called '*Madigaru*'. This activity was not monetary in nature. The *madigas* would process the hide and return it to the state; in return they could keep the flesh of the dead animals. However, the *madigas* had to sustain themselves either by cultivating land or by hiring themselves out as agricultural labourers (1985: 3-8).

It seems, therefore, that the textile industry in the eighteenth century was built on a caste based division of labour. Various caste communities were engaged at different levels in the textile industry, apart from other caste-specific economic activities. However, this picture of an intricately interdependent economy was to change with the overthrow of Tipu Sultan (1799) and the installation of the Wodeyar heir under the indirect rule of the British. In her analysis of the labour histories of Kolar and Bangalore, Janaki Nair writes that at the turn of the nineteenth century, Bangalore was estimated to have 12,000 looms, but had less than 3000 by 1849. This, she suggests was due largely to the de-industrialisation that followed the start of British rule in Bangalore:

A long period of no or little industrial activity followed; through most of the nineteenth century, Bangalore was little more than a depot for military supplies. (Nair, 1998: 17)

Pani et al argue that this was because, although a few new markets were opened with products such as sandal wood and intoxicating goods, the markets for textiles were

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or details, see Pani et al (1985: 6-8)



closed. This resulted in a cancellation of the export market of textiles. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the first signs of industrialisation, in the sense of large scale factory production, began to emerge (Pani et al, 1985:1).

The economic, political and social history of Bangalore through the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century is tied very closely with its spatial history and the processes of the establishment of the British cantonment, a civil and military station, envisaged by the British as an ‘isolated piece of British territory surrounded by foreign territory’<sup>7</sup>. In the next part, I shall, qua Nair (no date, 2003a), situate the ways in which this spatial history set the tone for the particular socio-economic and cultural politics of our present.

### ***Bangalore as a Divided City***

It was in the circumstances of their ascendancy in the princely state that the British applied to the Maharaja for the setting up of a Civil and Military Station on the eastern edge of the city in 1801. While the cantonment was situated within the jurisdiction of the princely state of Mysore and the Maharaja retained theoretical sovereignty, he ‘renounced all civil, judicial rights over the settlement’ (Pani, et al, 1985: 15). The British maintained the station as ‘an isolated British territory’ by controlling residence within the station and by regulating economic activity between the cantonment and the *petteh* (city).

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<sup>7</sup> As cited in Pani, et al (1985: 15), from confidential papers related to the surplus revenue of civil and military station, pol. 26, dt. March 4, 1880.

Therefore, they ensured that most of the occupants of the cantonment were non-Mysorean<sup>8</sup> and they regulated the sale of goods into the station from the *petteh*. Though the station, through the course of the nineteenth century, boasted of a large tobacco factory, breweries and tanneries, most industrial growth took place in the city area, where the silk industry enjoyed a precarious existence. The cantonment took on more the character of a 'township' and a military encampment. By the turn of the century, there were distinct divisions between the *petteh* and the cantonment: the former was the commercial hub and the administrative capital of Mysore, the latter was an independent area which flourished around a sphere of services (see Pani et al, 1985: 16, 17 and Nair, 1998: 17-18).

After the difficult de-industrialised years of the nineteenth century, Nair suggests that Bangalore's economic profile was given a minor boost with the setting up of a few large textile industries in the western parts of the city, that were propped up through grants of substantial concessions by the state. While there was a limited expansion thereafter of medium and small-scale textile units, as well as tanneries, brick and tile factories and assorted engineering factories across the city, it was through the years of the second world war, she suggests, that the years of concession paid off, when many of these industries were commandeered for war production (Nair, 1998: 18). Whilst the next boost was to come in the mid twentieth century with the textile industry boom and the proliferation of public sector companies, the composition of the new industries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were to determine the particular politics of the early twentieth century.

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<sup>8</sup> As Nair points out, 'although in 1891 migrants from Madras presidency were only 4 per cent of the population, most were concentrated in the districts of Bangalore, Kolar, and the *C&M station*' (Nair, 1998: 23, emphasis added).



### *Caste and Gender Composition of the New Industries*

In tracing the history of the larger textile mills such as the Mysore, Minerva and Binny Mills, Janaki Nair suggests that the composition of workers in these mills were very different from the composition of the textile industry in the eighteenth century. She argues that the recruitment to mills, factories and presses appears to have drawn very little from the existing range of worker castes in the area such as *devangas* or *tigalars* (Nair, 1998: 24, 192, 193). Instead, in newly industrialising Bangalore:

[...] skilled workers at the presses were usually Brahmins and other upper castes; and unskilled workers in textile mills ranged from non-Brahmin Hindus to lower castes. Unskilled workers in mills and factories were usually Adi Karnatakas and Adi Dravidas. (Nair, 1998: 205)

However, she complicates this picture by suggesting that the mediation of the machine diluted some traditional prejudices. Therefore, she argues that although leather tanning was performed by *madiga* communities and much of the workforce at the Bangalore tannery were drawn from *madiga* and Muslim communities, 'mechanisation of the processes made it possible for even Brahmins to be employed' (1998: 205). And yet, in other industries such as pottery, porcelain and printing establishments, the 'Brahmins were often favoured over other castes for promotion' (Nair, 1998: 206).

As regards the gendered nature of the labour workforce, Nair suggests that in the early part of the twentieth century, women (she does not specify the communities that the women belonged to) were absorbed into the textile mills in large numbers in the early stages, since familial migration was the norm. She suggests however, that while the increase in numbers of women in the textile industry was due in part to the



abolition of child labour, this was soon to give way to women 'clustering in a number of low paid professions, in the brick and tile, tobacco and ceramics industries'. In any case, she suggests, 'by 1941, women constituted no more than 10% of the workforce of the city, a far cry from the 24.3% of 1921' (Nair, 1998: 193).

Therefore, while Pani et al (1985) have recorded that in the eighteenth century, the textile industry was built on a hierarchical caste based division of labour, with traditional weaving communities making much of the textile hierarchy, women of the non-*brahmin* castes and 'lower' caste communities such as *holeyas* also contributed to the lower ends of the textile hierarchy. By the turn of the twentieth century, this picture was modified. *Brahmin* communities were to take up 'skilled' jobs in the new industries, especially the press; however, few even worked in the polluting tanning industry (This is apart from their domination in the administrative sector: see section on Non-*Brahmin* Politics, *Ram-Rajya* and Proto-Dalit Movement, below). Further, traditional weaving castes were left out of the textile industry, while castes such as the *madigas* and *holeyas* (*Adi-Dravida* and *Adi-Karnataka*) performed unskilled work in mills and factories. Still further, the caste hierarchy was maintained when it came to promotions. While women were employed in the textile industry, in part as a replacement for child labour, they were soon displaced into lower end occupations. The differences between caste communities, however, was much starker in terms of the conditions within which many of them lived.

### *Further Spatial Divisions: Working Class Neighbourhoods*

Janaki Nair suggests that there was a persistent segregation of dalit communities (Adi Dravidas) from 'caste Hindu workers' in working class areas in Bangalore in the early twentieth century (1998: 205). The argument that she makes is that questions of caste and community dominated not just the administrative ventures of town planning but also the ways in which the dominant castes controlled the space of the city (no date: 11). Nair argues that although the question of housing was to become politically charged only after the 1920s, right through the 1910-1930s, when more extensions were built in the city, further divisions came to be seared within the city. While the dominant caste communities increasingly re-located themselves from the old parts of the city to the new extensions in the south of the city, the prohibitive costs of the new extensions meant that the old (western) city and its surroundings was where most of the industrial workers, railway employees, and municipal employees continued to live. The dense population and the living conditions of the old city areas came to provide a sharp contrast, not just with the southern parts of the city where 'fine mansions were located on spacious grounds', but also with the cantonment area which, while having its spread of crowded 'working class' neighbourhoods, was in no way comparable to the 'abysmal conditions in the city' (Nair, 1998: 220).

The debates that raged on the question of housing for labouring communities in the early part of the twentieth century drew on the issues of the responsibilities of the state and factories for housing its workers, as well as an understanding of the connections between the 'unclean' conditions and 'moral degradation'. However, in the actual plans that were taken up for setting up housing, the question of caste



informed their nature as well as the outcomes. In a plan drawn up in 1919, Nair indicates, a community block for the poor was abandoned because of the 'practical difficulties' of housing 'Brahmins, other Hindus (upper caste, vegetarian), other Hindus (non-vegetarian), and Muslims and Christians' (Nair, 1998: 222). In 1902, Nair suggests, the *brahmins* had raised consistent and vociferous opposition to the grant of building sites to *holeyas* and had succeeded in urging the government to allot new sites well away from their neighbourhoods. Still further, while the government did urge the factories and mills to provide housing for their labourers, the steps taken by both the government and the factories and mills, Nair argues, were woefully inadequate (1998: 223-224).

Through the course of the nineteenth century and after, the divide between the *petteh* area and the cantonment area (over which the British had control right up to independence), the west and the east was seared. While this spatial divide continues to influence the linguistic and cultural identities of the residents of the city (Nair, 1996a, 2000b, no date), there were further divisions in the city between the labouring communities and the dominant caste communities, in terms of the conditions and spaces within which each of them lived. Apart from these spatial, cultural and economic divisions, the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the next were defining moments in the *non-brahmin* politics of the city. While much of this was debated around the introduction of 'caste based' reservations in jobs and education for *non-brahmin* people, it also entailed a crystallisation of caste identity through the processes of the formation of caste groups. In the next section, I examine these politics in brief to suggest the ways in which caste politics enabled, and was shaped by, a particular form of reformism by the state.



### *Non-Brahmin Politics, Ram Raj and Proto-Dalit Struggles*

In this section I shall suggest, along with Gail Omvedt (1994), that the particular *non-brahmin* politics that emerged in the princely state of Mysore in the early twentieth century was distinct from the *non-brahmin* and dalit politics in the provinces of Madras and Bombay. In Mysore, *non-brahmin* politics brought about a cohesion of ‘dominant’ *vokkaliga*, *lingayat* and Muslim communities, while simultaneously glossing over ‘lower caste’ communities, such as the *holeyas* and the *madigas*. Further, the edge of *non-brahmin* politics in the state was blunted by several social reform initiatives being undertaken by the state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the reformist tendencies of the state led to Gandhi’s famous characterisation of Mysore as a model of ‘Ram-Raj’, Omvedt suggests instead that this reformism, along with the particular brand of *non-brahmin* politics in the state, was conducive for a *Gandhian* politics of caste (1993: 62; 1994: 260-271). Japhet (1997), however, is a bit more optimistic in his categorisation of this period for dalit politics. He identifies in the proliferation of (‘lower’) caste-groups in this period<sup>9</sup> the rudimentary framework for a ‘proto-dalit movement’.

The specific argument that Gail Omvedt (1994) makes is that the British, princely and Gandhian paternalism that informed the politics in Mysore went hand in hand with an economic development which suppressed a robust social critique. Tracing the history of British paternalism to the 1860s, when state funds were used for restoring irrigation works, repairing tanks, giving incentives to coffee production and building the beginnings of a railway system (1994: 126), she maps several steps

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<sup>9</sup> For a list of the caste associations that were formed in the early part of the twentieth century and later, see Thimmaiah (1993: 70-72).

taken by the British that sought to bring about (a tempered) social change. As far back as 1874, the state had developed its own rudimentary policy of reservation for the appointment of non-brahmins to 8 out of 10 posts to fill vacancies in governmental service<sup>10</sup>. Thereafter, in 1914 and 1915 respectively, qualifications for the post of *amaldar* and *shekdar* were lowered, and in 1916 it was agreed that about 25% of the government jobs would be reserved for 'reasonably' qualified *non-brahmin* candidates (Thimmaiah, 1993: 42-55; Niranjana, 1995: 143)<sup>11</sup>.

What prompted these actions was the dominance of the *brahmins* in administrative services. Niranjana has established that in the early 1900s (as per the 1911 census) *brahmins*, who constituted 3.39% of the population, continued to dominate the administrative services, so much so that by about 1918, 'they occupied 69.64 per cent of clerkships, etc. and over 61 per cent of all "gazetted" or higher appointments and the rest of the population, that is 96 per cent (including the Muslims) held fewer than 30 per cent of the jobs, including the lowest ones available' (1995: 142; also see Thimmaiah, 1993: 45).

While the state attempted to delink the administrative system from any caste monopoly when the British adopted the policy of rotation of castes for important administrative positions in Bangalore, the same does not seem to have been applied to the lower rungs of administration, such as the 'scavenger establishment' that was

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<sup>10</sup> This was highly contested and did not find easy resolution even after the Miller committee was appointed in 1918 (Thimmaiah, 1993: 46, 47).

<sup>11</sup> There were other attempts at 'social reform' through the abolition of child labour and the regulation of infant marriages. However these attempts were often mired in a *brahminical* and colonial re-fashioning of tradition in ways that was not always with fruitful consequences for women and people of 'lower caste' communities (Nair, 1996, 1998).



maintained by the government for the purposes of the *petteh* since its inception in August, 1838 (Pani, et al, 1985: 15).

Again, as early as 1915, the government had insisted that all dalits be allowed to enter schools. This move was opposed by all the other communities including the Muslims, showing the early difficulties in conceiving of a '*non-brahmin*' movement, which was formed soon thereafter in 1917 as the *Praja Mitra Mandali* (Thimmaiah, 1993: 43-46). This group was inspired by the Madras *non-brahmin* movement and represented the interests of an alliance of *non-brahmins*, primarily the *lingayats*, *vokkaligas* and Muslims. While there were some leaders in this group that were interested in dalit organising such as CR Reddy and Muruges Pillai, they were non-Kannadigas, and could not consolidate the Tamil and Kannada dalits (Omvedt, 1994: 128). Nair suggests therefore, that in the Mysore state of the 1920s, apart from the moral and legal reform initiatives, there was an attempt by *brahmins* to consolidate an alliance with the depressed classes against the dominant *non-brahmin* movement<sup>12</sup> (Nair, 1998: 215).

In the context of the larger questions around caste in the national scene, especially after the 1930s, Omvedt writes that Congress Gandhian workers set about working amongst the 'harijan' communities. They called for the 'right to use all temples, roads, public places and tanks and stressed internal reforms such as cleanliness,

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<sup>12</sup> While there were different political alignments being made in the sphere of the political in ways that affected the nature of the dalit question in this period, there were the beginnings of modern Kannada literature as well, shaped in particular ways by nationalism. Tejaswini Niranjana argues that 'although on the one hand it was an emergent nationalism that provided the terms of the debate for discussion of culture and literature in Kannada, on the other hand [...] the meanings of these terms were shaped *against* the beginnings and consolidation of the non-Brahmin movement in Princely Mysore in the early part of this century' (Niranjana, 1995: 142).



giving up meat-eating and drinking of alcohol and the propagation of a Brahman Hinduism' (Omvedt, 1994: 131). And yet, there was the rudimentary dalit politics in the making with the organisation of groups such as the *Adi-Dravida Abhivruddhi Sangam* which was Tamil-based but sought to include Kannadigas, and the *Adi-Jambava Sangha*, based on *madiga* communities (Omvedt, 1994: 129). They took up some crucial economic issues, such as land, education and traditional caste duties. However, Omvedt suggests that the 'social' issues were presented in a 'conservative, Hinduizing fashion' with *brahmins* dominant as spokesmen (1994: 132). As Japhet writes, the proto-dalit organisations 'posited a split between the social and the political', in that they were interested in transforming the social policy of the state through social protectionist policies for the lower castes (1997: 32).

Therefore, caste politics leading up to the years of independence was embroiled in a conflict between *non-brahmin* and *brahmin* politics. While there was the proliferation of several caste-based groups, the concerns of dalit communities were taken up in the languages of reformism, with only the barest space for a radical re-fashioning of dalit identity.

## **Bangalore: The Current Context**

In this section, I shall briefly outline the ways in which the 'remembered and imagined' city are entwined with the particular liberalisation of economy that Bangalore has seen over the last decade. A particular vision of Bangalore has been expressed by the state and para-statal organisations linked to the IT sector in recent years. One such para-statal organisation is the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) set up in 1999 and headed by Nandan Nilekani, the director of Infosys, one

of the largest IT firms in the world. With its purposive slogans - 'drive Bangalore forward' and 'making Bangalore a world-class city'- BATF provides a stark context for the inherent understanding of 'cleaning up' the city, of its slums and street peddlers, that such a vision entails (Nair, 2003a, 2003b; Anundhe, 2003).

In the years after independence, Bangalore became the location of several large public sector industries, employing more than 110,000 workers in the 1960s, which grew to a remarkable 300,000 by the mid-80s (Nair, no date: 2). These years followed the early conception of Bangalore as a 'science city' with its 'public sector par excellence' image. The relative invisibility of its producing and labouring classes, in comparison to other cities, produced an image of the city as a middle class city. Nair suggests however, that this image is indicative of an absence more than anything else, attributable to:

[...] the relatively weak and delayed emergence of nationalist politics in the city and the severely restricted career of the left, which in the post independence years was founded on the (overwhelmingly male) trade unionism of the privileged public sector and large private units. (Nair, no date: 3)

From around the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, when the public sector industries were slowly being dismantled within the 'logics of liberalisation' (Nair, no date: 3), Bangalore experienced a significant real estate boom. This, Benjamin argues, heralded the liberalisation of the economy of Bangalore, whilst changing the landscapes of consumption of Bangalore's central areas, 'with new up-market stores, international banks, and renewed attention to its pubs and international fast food chains although not without reaction' (Benjamin, 2000: 36).

Following the general trend of liberalisation across India, Bangalore was at the heart of the information technology industry boom, fuelling the setting up of satellite

townships catering specifically to the needs of the industry. However, as Heitzman has suggested, in the early 1990s when the IT boom is supposed to have come to Bangalore, there was far more employment to be found in the garment industry, with 79,000 people being employed in that one industry alone, most of whom were women (Nair, no date: 3; Heitzman, 2001: 43). Drawing an economic picture of Bangalore in the early 1990s, James Heitzman argues that there was:

[...] massive employment in industrial factories and small finishing shops, an important textile complex including handloom production, an electronics industry with only a small proportion moving into computer systems, and a giant informal sector featuring extensive child labour [consisting of] coolies, factory workers, domestic servants, rollers of incense sticks, mechanics, assistants, shop assistants, hotel workers, sweepers, rag pickers, tailors, carpenters, and cigarette rollers. (2001: 44-45)

Despite this, the perception that the IT industry has transformed the fortunes of the city continues to fuel the aspirations of not just trained experts, managers and technologists, but also the administrative agendas of the planned growth of the city. In such a context, there have been debates about the reasons for the change that Bangalore was at the heart of, especially in relation to the IT industry (Aranya, 2003; Heitzman, 2001). It has been argued that the heritage of Bangalore as a 'science city', developed as a centre for scientific innovation, with research in aeronautics, electronics as well as the concomitant skilled manpower in the public sector industries provided the basis for 'its shift from a centre of public sector research to the global economy' (Aranya, 2001: 1-2). Located amongst these debates about the visions for Bangalore, are the efforts of M Visveshwaraya, a Diwan of princely Mysore whose motto was 'industrialise or perish'; the establishment of the Indian Institute of Science (founded in 1911); the massive investments in the public sector enterprises and research and technology establishments; and Nehru's characterisation of Bangalore as the 'city of the future' (Heitzman, 2001: 41).



However amid these debates, James Heitzman (2001) locates the *construction* of Bangalore as the apt bearer of the title of ‘the silicon valley’. He illuminates the relationship between the ‘construct of the global city and [the] models of planning and industry’, by tracing the processes through which the state allied with private technology initiatives to promote a new identity for the ‘garden city’ (2001: 45-47). The linkages between the planning agendas of government and the technology initiatives, not just in terms of economic ‘growth’ but also in terms of town planning, are therefore at the heart of a particular vision of making Bangalore a global city.

### ***The Remembered and Imagined City***

James Heitzman’s sardonic observation that, ‘since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bangalore has lived on its dreams’ (2001: 47), is laced with the violence that accompanies the aspirations of Bangalore as the ‘science city’, the ‘garden city’, ‘silicon valley’ and now, ‘a world class, global city’. Janaki Nair (2000a, 2003a) has interrogated these dreams in terms of her conceptualisation of the ‘imagined city’. She has argued that while there have been several model cities, such as London, Paris, Prague, that have fuelled the imaginations of politicians and bureaucrats alike for the last four to five decades, the one model that town planners have come to rest on is Singapore, ‘with its broad clean streets, its elevated Mass Rapid Transit System, and its sleek downtown skyline and theme park tourism’ (2000a: 1512).

While the first strong plea to make Bangalore like Singapore was made in 1971 (Nair, 2000a: 1512), it was in the specific context of the IT sector boom and the general liberalisation policies of the country that the need to make Bangalore a lucrative corporate-investment destination finds a place within governmental

planning agendas. Therefore in 1999, the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF), headed by the director of Infosys, Nandan Nilekani, and vaunted as a unique public-private enterprise, was set up by the chief minister of Karnataka, SM Krishna. In the subsequent 'Bangalore Summit' held on January 24, 2000 for the various stakeholders of the city, when many new plans for the co-ordinated development of the city were unveiled, the 'citizen-stakeholder' identified several 'problems' in Bangalore:

[...] the condition of the roads, garbage, mosquitoes, pollution and public toilets [...] blocked sewage, poor traffic management, alcohol in residential areas, public safety [and] public transport. (Nair, 2000a: 1512)

While Janaki Nair suggests that there are limits with an understanding of the citizen as 'stakeholder' in such processes, she also indicates that the strongly middle class profile of the city could be the reason why these 'problems' reflect the priorities of the 'citizens' of Bangalore in their quest to privatise the city (2000a: 1512, 1514). That is the reason why, she argues, the citizenry of Bangalore chose to highlight the conditions of the roads instead of public transport, garbage and pollution instead of public housing, mosquitoes and toilets instead of public health (2000a: 1512). However, Nair has also forcefully highlighted that the problem-free imagined city of Bangalore sits alongside an understanding of the 'remembered city' (2003a), which evokes a nostalgia for Bangalore's garden past through campaigns such as 'Bring Back Beauty to Bangalore' (no date: 2). The argument that she makes is that the city has been ill-served by these two registers.

The BATF, nevertheless, has already set to work in Bangalore with its aesthetic bus shelters, uniformed street cleaners and various other projects for Bangalore's citizenry. Identifying the priority issues of 'garbage', 'road safety' and 'traffic', they



have also highlighted the need to 'reclaim' public spaces such as footpaths, parks, playgrounds and bus shelters, arguing that every space in the city has a specified purpose. Along with projects such as Swachha Bangalore (Clean Bangalore) and Nirmal Bangalore (Beautiful Bangalore) they have also dabbled with self assessments schemes for tax collection (see [www.blrforward.com](http://www.blrforward.com)). Sanjay Anundhe (2003) has highlighted the difficulties that such private-public enterprises pose for questions of democracy, while also suggesting that the initial zest with which BATF ventured to address issues of governance has been tempered somewhat.

It becomes clear that the 'remembered and imagined city' of Bangalore, in conversation with an entrepreneurial, government sanctioned dream of the IT sector of Bangalore as a 'world class city', informs much of the planning and directions Bangalore has taken in the last few years. Consequently, apart from the private-public stakeholder initiatives, there has been a dedicated investment in 'mega projects', most significantly, Benjamin (2000) suggests, through an investment in infrastructure. Consequently, there has been a Rs.1.35 billion investment in the 'mega-city project', jointly financed by the government of India, the state government and financial institutions that is aimed at 'shifting the iron and steel market to decongest central areas, and on the construction of ring roads, fly-over bridges and truck terminals' (Benjamin, 2000: 37-38). In the light of this, Bangalore has seen the construction of several flyovers, the most recent of which is said to be the longest in India (The Times of India, 2003).

Further projects include a Rs. 3.1 billion Asian Development Bank funded project to decongest Bangalore by promoting four satellite towns, and the Bangalore-Mysore



infrastructure corridor, which envisages an expressway and the subsequent ‘development’ of the townships along it (Benjamin, 2000: 38). Still further, the Devanahalli international airport project has been in the pipeline for sometime now, though not without opposition.

As Benjamin argues, the funds for the decongestion of Bangalore through the promotion of satellite townships are not aimed at improving conditions within the towns, but at ‘acquiring land to promote large corporate residential and work environments and related infrastructure such as multi-lane highways and dedicated water supply and electrical power systems’ (2000: 38). Further, he writes that the ‘public sponsorship’ of such ‘private enclaves’ is through ‘the acquisition of land under “eminent domain”, off-site infrastructure development, dedicated civic amenities, as well as larger infrastructure works such as the promotion of an international airport’ (2000: 38).

These investments have come at a high cost to the poor in Bangalore city. Stories abound of the demolition of ‘illegal’ slums, ‘cleaning’ the streets of ‘hawkers’ and ‘peddlers’, even as each mega-city project has spawned resistance from various groups. Therefore the visions for Bangalore are highly contested. One of the ways in which this have been contested is in the claiming of a legitimate space for the urban poor in the city, which includes an articulation of the *legitimacy* of the poor in urban spaces. While I shall examine the ways in which these claims are made in the section on the Politics in Bangalore (see below), in the next section I shall situate the context of the city’s slums, their composition and the socio-economic conditions in which the residents live.

## ***Nammauru Bengaluru, Nimmuru Yaavauru- Our Town is Bangalore, Which is Your Town?***

According to the 2001 census, 345,200, i.e. a mere 8.04% of the population within the limits of the corporation, live within its slums (Census of India, 2001). Although it has been argued that, compared to the proportion of slums in other metropolitan cities, the number of slums in Bangalore is fairly low, allowing for the conception of the city as a middle class city (Ramachandran, 1985 and Nair, 2003a, 2003b, no date), this estimate is conservative indeed. Further, it does not yet (the figures from the 2001 census are still to be collated), provide figures of the population in the slums of the larger Bangalore urban agglomeration, a caste-based analysis of the people living in slums and the occupations that they are engaged in or an account of the social and economic conditions of the slums.

I have brought out as much of this information as possible through newspaper articles, papers produced by organisations such as STEM, Janasahayog, CIVIC, APSA, who are working in the slums of Bangalore and have carried out relatively large surveys and produced reports on the socio-economic conditions of the slums of Bangalore. However, each survey looks at different numbers of slums located in different parts of the city using different categories of analysis; and this is therefore by no means a comprehensive picture. Having said that, these surveys depict a vivid picture of the demography of slums, the conditions within which people live, the kinds of issues that they think are important, and the ways in which they make claims within the frameworks available to them.



### *Spatial Re-Orientation: Demography and Numbers of Slums in Bangalore*

In his analysis of the slumming of the metropolis, Ramachandran argues that in 1971-72, the Bangalore city corporation contained 159 declared slums which rose 85% to 287 in 1982 (Ramachandran, 1985: 38). He estimates that the number of people living in the (declared) slums in Bangalore in the 1970s were 130,000, accounting for about 10% of the population. More recently, BG Kulkarni, using data collected from the Bangalore Development Authority, Karnataka Slums Improvement and Clearance Board, and the Bangalore City Corporation in 1997-98, suggests that in 1991, the number of slums in Bangalore was 344, which constituted a population of 560,000 (1999). However, figures from a report by STEM in 1992 estimated that there were 464 slums in the Bangalore urban agglomeration, with a total population of 851,000 accounting for 19% of the population (STEM, 1992). The official figures by 2000, continued to remain in the vicinity of 312 (Asian Age, 2000) to '400-odd' (Kandath, 2000), depending on who was doing the counting and whether or not slums that were not declared were counted.

However, the representatives of the Bangalore City Saksharatha Samithi, a wing of the department of mass education, in a survey conducted before the launch of their literacy programme, put the number of slums at 715 (Kandath, 2000). Solomon Benjamin suggests that the estimates might be closer to 800 - 1000, and he adds that these house 1.35 million, i.e. 25% of the population (Benjamin, 2000: 38). A more recent report by Janasahayog and CIVIC (2003) puts the official numbers at 778 with the slum population at a high 1.85 million, about 26% of the population. From the lowest census estimates to the highest, based on surveys and official government



reports, there are between 8.04% - 26% of Bangalore's population living in its slums, a huge discrepancy indeed. This is even more stark when Benjamin suggests that if one were to include figures of the non-slum poor, more than 40% of the population of Bangalore would be defined as poor (2000: 38).

Given the murky realm of what Ramanathan (2003) has termed the 'twilight zone' between illegality and illegitimacy of the urban poor (especially migrants), the discrepancy in figures should be no surprise. This is especially so when the 'land rights' of slum communities are extremely fragile. As the Janasahayog and CIVIC report (2003) suggests: *none* of the documents issued by the various government bodies guarantee an *absolute* right to the land that slum communities reside on (2003: 19). This provides a vivid context for the struggles of the urban poor to claim a legal and legitimate space in the city, especially amidst the processes of middle class civil society's claims making (above). Janasahayog and CIVIC (2003) report that of the estimated 778 slums in Bangalore city, 113 were located in prominent localities in central city areas with the threat of eviction in the name of the development of the city (2003: 2). In the next few sections, I shall lay out the caste, gender and occupational profiles of the people living in the slums, as well as the conditions in which they live.

### *Composition of Slums*

#### Caste, Religion and Ethnicity

In much of the surveys and reports on the composition of the slums, variable factors have been taken into account. Therefore, while some surveys situate the context of the residents in terms of religion, others their migrant status, still others locate their

context in ethnicity and caste. Therefore, in this section, I attempt to paint a picture from inevitably disparate reports and surveys.

In a survey conducted in 1973-1974 under the city Survey project of 311 'households' in 11 slums of the city (no caste and gender profiles), Ramachandran suggests that migrants constituted 60% of the population of the slum. Of these migrants most were from Karnataka (46%). Most of these migrants were from the southern districts, which Ramachandran qualifies by suggesting that recent trends indicate a change, with the North Karnataka migrants increasing in number. 36% of migrants were from Tamil Nadu, 15% from Andhra Pradesh and 1% from Kerala. He further suggests that urban migrants pre-dominate in the non-slum areas (52%) and rural born migrants in slums (53%) (Ramachandra, 1985: 39, 40). Janaki Nair (1996a) fleshes out Ramachandran's observations by arguing that while 67% of *Kannada* slum dwellers came to Bangalore after 1954, roughly the same percentage (63%) of *Tamils* had migrated before that year. However, she notes that after that time there was a sharp drop in Tamil migrants, with numbers in continuing decline, although Tamils continue to account for a sizeable proportion of *lower end* immigrants (1996a: 2811).

More recently, a report by STEM in 1992 estimated that of the 851,000 people living in slums, 34% of the slum population, was made of Tamil communities as against 33% Kannada speaking communities. The report further suggests that about 17% were Urdu speaking, 14% Telugu speaking and 2% were others (STEM, 1992). In 2003, Janasahayog and CIVIC profiled 307 leaders from 77 slums in Bangalore. They found that about 29% of the leaders were Kannada speaking, about 41% were



Tamil, 25% were from the Telugu community and the rest were predominantly Urdu speaking. While this is no categorical statement on the populations of these slums, it is indicative of the composition of the slums surveyed.

BG Kulkarni, using data collected from the Bangalore Development Authority, Karnataka Slums Improvement and Clearance Board, and the Bangalore City Corporation in 1997-98 (based on figures for 1991), suggests that of 560,000 people residing in slums (29.71%) were of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population (1999). However, in a recent survey conducted on either side of the railway track by Janasahayog and APSA (no date), they found that in 60 slums surveyed, of the total population of 79,502, 46.9% were from the scheduled caste community, 7.3% were from the scheduled tribe community and 5% were other backward classes, 17.5% were Muslims, 15.6% were Christians and others were 7.5% (Janasahayog and APSA, no date).

A recent survey conducted by Janasahayog and CIVIC in 77 Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) slums, profiled a group of 307 slum leaders, of whom 60% were scheduled caste<sup>13</sup> (of them however, nearly 60% were from the *madiga* community) and about 30% were women (Janasahayog and CIVIC, 2003: 7-8). Again, as I have suggested earlier, while this does not make any categorical statements about the numbers of dalit communities in the slums surveyed, it does indicate that there probably is a preponderance of dalit communities in these particular slums.

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<sup>13</sup> The other slums leaders belonged to the Scheduled Tribe community, backward communities, Christians, Muslims; four belonged to 'other' communities. (Janasahayog and CIVIC, 2003)

The picture that emerges from these statistics is that people living in the slums of Bangalore are predominantly from dalit communities, Christian communities (that may be predominantly dalit Christian), Muslim and 'other backward' communities. There is a high preponderance of Tamil, Kannada and Urdu speaking communities (who are probably rural migrants) compared to other communities such as the Telugu and Malayalam speaking people.

### Occupations of Slum Residents

Ramachandra argues that, although it was found in a survey conducted in 1971-1972 that only 14 of the 159 declared slums surveyed were located near industrial establishments, we could not conclude that industrial development is unrelated to slum growth. He argues that while many of the industries in Bangalore call for skilled labour and technicians, the necessary services related to the industrial population had to be provided, as well as the labour required for consequent increase in construction activities. The unskilled labourers in such services, he suggests, find their residences in slums (1985: 39).

Therefore, he suggests that the amongst the residents of the 159 declared slums in the Bangalore of 1971-72, about 19% worked in construction labour, 18% as service workers, 2% as professional workers and contractors, 12% as clerical and sales workers, 2% as farmers and loggers, 14% as coolies, 5% in the basket and *agarbathi* making industry, 6% as mechanics, 5% as cartmen, drivers, cleaners and 18% as other production workers (Ramachandra, 1985: 39, 40).



In a general estimation of the occupations of the slum dwellers in the report published by STEM (1992), it was suggested that 4% were white collar workers, 5% did domestic work, 68% were manual, unskilled labourers, 14% were semi-skilled, and 9% were non workers. While the report does not provide a gendered profile of the occupation of slum dwellers, it suggests that the labour participation rate for females in the age-group 15-59 was 34.6% as compared to 83.1% for males.

In the survey conducted by Janasahayog and APSA (no date) in 60 railway track slums, it is suggested that the major occupations of the men were construction and coolie work and that most of the women were employed as domestic workers, coolies and in *agarbathi* and *beedi* factories. Children were mostly employed in garages and in construction work (Janasahayog and APSA, no date).

The 307 'leaders' in the 77 Bangalore Mahanagara Palike slums, surveyed by Janasahayog and CIVIC (2003), worked as carpenters, in printing, in painting, in electrical work, as sub contractors, as *coolies*, in domestic work (13 leaders), in *beedi*, *agarbathi* rolling (14), as traders, in tailoring (9), as housewives (10), as social workers, as journalists and as auto drivers. Amongst the 307 leaders, only about 88 had salaried employment; working in factories, hospitals, the garment industry, in the security industry and in hotels. Of these, only 31 leaders worked as salaried persons in the public sector, listing their jobs as government jobs, BMP employees and bank employees (Janasahayog and CIVIC, 2003).

From these statistics, it seems that many of the people living in the slums work as unskilled, manual labourers, while there are some who have found semi-skilled and

skilled employment. Still further, there are a few who have found salaried employment in the private and public sectors. The occupations of the communities living in the slums range between construction work, carpentry, painting, auto driving, working in factories, hospitals, domestic work, *beedi* industry, *agarbathi* industry, hotels to working as government employees. While the gendered profiles of work are woefully abysmal, from the Janasahayog and CIVIC report (2003) it seems that women are involved in the *agarbathi* industry, *beedi* industry, domestic work and in coolie work.

Therefore, Kulkarni's assertion that slums are dominated by low income, low occupation, high migrant groups and the 'weaker sections - Scheduled Castes' (1999), while resonating in the literature, needs to be modified by indicating that there is also a high preponderance of (possibly dalit) Christian, Muslim and 'other backward communities', most of whom are Tamil, Kannada and Urdu (possibly rural migrant) groups. In the next section, I contextualise this picture of the demography of slums in the city by providing a sketch of dalit communities in the urban context, before I go on to situate the socio-economic conditions of the slums of Bangalore.

### *Dalits and the City*

According to an all-India socio-economic profile of the scheduled caste community drawn up in 1990, about 16% of the scheduled caste community lived in urban areas. About 50% lived below the poverty line, about 21% were literate, 48% worked as agricultural labourers, 66% lived as bonded labourers, and about 4% worked in industrial employment (Mungekar, B, 1999: 291); as regards employment in the



central government and public sector units, Mungekar suggests that most of them worked as Grade IV employees and as sweepers (1999: 293).

TG Jacob (2000) writes that in the specific context of Karnataka, according to the 1991 census, of the state's population, 16.38% were dalits ('scheduled caste') and 4.25% were *adivasi* ('scheduled tribe'). Of this dalit population, 76.60% was rural and the rest urban. Of the total rural population therefore, dalits constituted 18.16%, whereas they constituted 12.40% of the urban population. For Bangalore (urban) district, however, this picture was modified slightly with dalits constituting 14.70% of the population (2000: 65-66). However, more recent estimates suggest that the population of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities in Karnataka are at 25%, with 18% of the population belonging to scheduled caste communities and 7% to scheduled tribe communities<sup>14</sup> (Times of India, September 4, 2001).

According to the Dalit Municipal Corporation Worker's Federation (DMCWF) which is a wing of the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS), it is estimated that about 80,000 workers are employed in different municipalities in Karnataka. Of these 90% belong to the 'untouchable' castes (Mane, DA, 1994: 110). This picture is fleshed out by an analysis of dalit communities predominating in the 'scavenger' and sweeping jobs, working as Grade IV employees in the municipalities (Thaekaekara, 1999; Prashad, 2000).

In the specific context of Bangalore, a fact finding report by the Support Group for the Guttuge Pourakarmika Sangha (Contract Street Cleaners), records that each of

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<sup>14</sup> Therefore, there have been calls from dalit groups, especially the DSS to increase the reservation of dalit communities from the current 15% to 18%.

the 140 health wards of the city requires about 50-100 contract street cleaners to keep it clean. Nearly all of the contract street cleaners are dalit, about 80% are women and all of them live in the slums of Bangalore (Support Group for GPS, 2002: 2-7).

From the statistics available it is difficult to assess whether most of the urban dalit communities live in the slums, though there is a preponderance of dalit communities in the slums of Bangalore. Further, while it is difficult to separate the occupations of slum communities from that of specifically dalit communities, it seems that there is a high preponderance of dalit communities (especially women) working as contract street cleaners in the city of Bangalore, as elsewhere. I will return to the work that dalit women do in Bangalore city in Chapter 5, Part 2.

### *The Socio-Economic Conditions of Slums*

Ramachandran, using his survey of 11 slums in 1973-74, has argued that in general, the location of slums was relegated to sites that were least desirable from the habitat point of view - low lying areas that are susceptible to inundation, quarry pits, tank beds, along railway lines, near cemeteries and slaughter houses (1985: 39). In a more recent survey conducted on either side of the railway tracks in Bangalore city by Janasahayog and APSA (no date), they suggest that the total area on which the 60 slums were situated was 94 acres, 25 guntas, i.e. 1.57 acres per slum, with the average population of each slum surveyed was 12,000 (no date: 1-2). In their recent survey, Janasahayog and CIVIC (2003) suggest that the 77 slums that they surveyed housed 230,000 people on 246 acres 30 guntas, with an average of about 935 people living on an acre of land. The picture of slums as densely populated living spaces located on 'least desirable' sites, affected by 'natural calamities such as floods and



fires' is a recurring theme amongst the surveys and reports on the conditions of slums (Janasahayog and CIVIC, 2003; STEM, 1992).

Solomon Benjamin (2000) has argued that the data on the nature of the disparities between the rich and the poor is not easily available because it is not much discussed in public fora. He argues that income disparities in Bangalore indicate that 'half the city's households shares less than one-quarter of total income' (2000: 38). In a similar vein, the report by STEM estimates that of the 851,000 people in slums in 1992, about 55% of slum residents lived below the poverty line (1992).

Benjamin posits that a sharper picture of poverty in the city emerges from examining the access to services such as water supply and sanitation. He makes some rather stark observations in his analysis of the numbers of people who have access to water. In Bangalore, he suggests, almost one-third of the population has only partial or no access to piped water. In fact, he suggests that more than half of the population of Bangalore depends upon public fountains, many of which supply contaminated water because of poor maintenance and broken pipes (Benjamin, 2000: 38). In the survey conducted by Janasahayog and APSA (no date), of the 60 slums surveyed, corporation taps were available in 50%, there was a borewell in 55%, a mini-water supply in 36.6%. In 30% of the slums however, residents had to seek 'other sources of water'. What these statistics do not reveal, however, is whether the number of taps available in a slum is adequate for the number of residents in a given slum. They do not also reveal the number of hours per week that water is made available to the residents through these taps. Further, it has been well-documented that the burdens of fetching water are gendered.

As regards access to sanitation facilities, Benjamin argues that an official report for 1994 stated that there were some 113,000 houses in Bangalore without any latrines and 17,500 had dry latrines. In a survey of about 22 slums, nine with a total population of 35,400 had no latrine facilities at all. In another ten, there were 19 public latrines for 16,850 households or 102,000 inhabitants (Benjamin, 2000: 39). Similarly, in the survey conducted by Janashayog and APSA (no date) of the 60 slums surveyed, in only 50% of the slums were a few individual latrines available. While in 22% of the slums, common latrines were available, over 60% of the slums had no latrine facilities that they could access and the residents had to use the railway tracks and nearby open places. The lack of access to sanitation facilities is intensified by the fact that without a sewer connection, even if people attempted to save money to build their own toilets, they could not (Benjamin, 2000: 39).

While the government has offered financial assistance to private enterprises such as Sulabh International to provide sanitation facilities in urban areas, including in its slums, such facilities are not available in most of the slums of Bangalore, and where they do exist, there are varying service charges that have to be paid for their use (Janasahayog and CIVIC, 2003: 32). That the enterprise has been vaunted as a programme for 'scavenger' liberation (Pathak, B, 1996: 198-208), only exacerbates the utter callousness of the state towards its 'lesser' citizens.

Benjamin cites reports that indicate that many women suffer from intra-uterine diseases and were anaemic because they did not have access to toilets. He also points to reports of women being harassed when they had to use open fields. Still further, he



suggests that most of the diseases faced by women and children in the slums are related to contaminated water or inadequate supplies for personal hygiene: scabies, diarrhoea, cholera, typhoid and eye infections (2000: 39). In their 1992 survey, STEM provide statistics in relation slums residents' access to medical facilities. They argue that more slum residents go to private doctors for treatment of sickness than to government hospitals because hospitals are either too far away, have long waiting times or they are treated shabbily by the staff (1992: i).

So far I have examined the demography of Bangalore's slums and suggested that there is a preponderance of dalit communities in the slums of Bangalore. However, there are differences between the communities in terms of caste, religion as well as language. Having said that, organisations working in and with slum communities have sought to build upon the cohesion of slum identity for the residents of the slums, brought about by the local living conditions. While there is a cultural component to the ways in which slum communities are constructed, the overwhelming trope of slum politics is an emphasis on the economic conditions of slums. In the next section I shall briefly locate some of these issues with which slum politics is engaged in the context of Bangalore. Thereafter, in relation to dalit politics, I shall indicate that while there are many groups located in the city, and many of them work in the slums of Bangalore, there is no easy fit between the politics of the city and dalit politics. I suggest instead that a contextualisation of the struggles of the DSS will provide a basis for assessing the gendered and dalit politics of dalit groups, men and women, in Bangalore, which is what I set out to do in the following two chapters.



## Re-envisioning the City: Slum and Dalit Politics

### *Slum Politics*

A pamphlet at Janasahayog lists out several myths about slum dwellers. Amongst the myths listed were two that said, 'slums are a burden on the urban economy' and 'cities would be better off without slum-dwellers and migrants to the cities'. In opposition, the pamphlet suggested, 'slums are the life-line of all economic activity in a city and throb with enterprise and migrants provide labour for city cleaning, construction, transport and much more'.

The argument that slums constitute *productive communities* is one that is repeatedly made by slum residents, activists and theoreticians. Solomon Benjamin (1999, 2000, 2003) has consistently argued that 'localised economies', found in slums and low-income housing, sustain the economies of cities. He suggests that an understanding of the 'informal sector', with its linear conception of economic processes, ought to be replaced by an understanding of 'cluster economies' and an analysis of 'neighbourhoods as factories'. Drawing on several cluster economies in Delhi, Ramanagaram and in Valmiki Nagar in the west of Bangalore, he argues:

[...a closer look at] these 'informal' enterprises [...] suggests that these kind of "messy" settings are critically important for employment generation. They allow for enterprises to start up and to find relatively cheap land with loose land use regulations. Perhaps most importantly, they provide proximity to demand, to markets and suppliers that opens up opportunities for financial and sub-contracting links, and access to trade agents and markets at city and regional levels. (2000: 44)

The larger argument that Benjamin, along with Bhuvaneshwari makes, is that the fortunes of the poor in the city are linked to their access to pro-poor urban places in terms of land-political relationships (no date: 4), for example, their access to areas where mixed-land use is sustained by local political structures. He argues for an

understanding of 'politics by stealth' in terms of analysing the strategies of survival of the poor and in proposing reform of policies that affect the urban poor (2000).

While Benjamin's analysis of 'cluster economies' is not indicative of the economic activity in all of Bangalore's slums, it provides us an insight into slums as productive communities as well as an understanding that the relationship of land with local political structures influences the fortunes of the poor in the city. Further, Benjamin and Bhuvaneshwari have argued that 'in the central city areas, the main issue [for the urban poor] is access to drinking water and locations with secure tenure due to competition by richer groups. In the peripheral areas, the issue is of attracting public investments in basic infrastructure and civic amenities in competition with investments for Master Planned areas' (no date: 13).

Therefore, in contrast to the priorities of the middle class citizenry, the 'problems' that 307 slum leaders of 77 slums surveyed by Janasahayog and CIVIC (2003) identified in the city were related to land, in terms of security of tenure and rights to housing, and access to amenities such as water and sanitary facilities. Related to issues of land were the inter-linked questions of zoning in urban areas, mixed land use and master planned areas.

Apart from what Benjamin has termed 'a politics by stealth', the strategies of the urban poor are evidenced by the political organisation of slum communities by slum groups. This entails strategizing against evictions (as the Janasahayog and CIVIC report suggests, slums with a population of under a 100 families are more vulnerable to eviction), and ensuring that slum residents have access to all the documents that

various departments of government offer to the urban poor, even if these do not guarantee a right to the land they occupy. Janasahayog and CIVIC, in their report (2003), list out the various departments and authorities of the government that have distributed documents amongst people living in the slums: the voters' identity cards for casting their votes; ration cards for obtaining food at subsidized rates; possession certificates (by the BMP) to ensure their legitimate stay on a piece of land; the Ashraya and Ambedkar *hakku patras* (certificates of rights) by the Revenue department, promising a site for housing or an assurance for allotment of houses on subsidized rates; the identity cards issued by the Slum Board, enabling people to avail basic amenities including subsidized housing (2003: 15).

As evidenced by some surveys, the documents 'offered' by the government varied from slum to slum. In the survey conducted by Janasahayog and APSA (no date), 80% were on the voter's list, 85% had ration cards; however only 13.3% had possession certificates, 6.6% had a slum board identity card and 6.6% had *hakku patras*. Similarly, in the Janasahayog and CIVIC report (2003) in the 77 slums surveyed, it was found that:

A few families in 43 slums possess the possession certificates issued by BMP and the families living in remaining 31 slums have not got possession certificates. With regard to Ashraya and Ambedkar hakkupathras, a few families living in 4 slums have possessed them and remaining 61 do not have them. As far as ID cards from slum board, a few families of 7 slums possess them and all families living in 70 slums do not possess them. (2003: 19)

While this is hardly a comprehensive picture of slum politics in Bangalore, it is indicative of the issues that slum residents face as well as the strategies that they adopt in re-claiming a *legitimate* space in the city. The overwhelming trope in the politics of slum communities is in terms of the economic context as well as contributions of slum communities.



Janaki Nair on the other hand, has addressed the re-territorialisation of the city in the specific context of linguistic and ethnic groups as well as dalit groups. She locates this re-territorialisation in the burgeoning Kannada nationalism from the 1960s onwards. She recognises the influence of the Gokak agitation in 1982; the Cauvery riots in 1991; the protests against the installation of the statue of the 'Tamil' Sangam poet, Thiruvalluvar in the early 1990s; and more recently, the kidnapping of the matinee idol, Rajkumar by the sandalwood smuggler, Veerappan in the summer of 2000<sup>15</sup>. Written in these stories of re-territorialisation are the mixed responses by the dalit movement. Nair indicates that while dalit groups were selectively supportive of the Gokak agitation, even as they held onto their primary identity as dalit, they were not supportive of the protests against the installation of the statue of Thiruvalluvar, as they claimed him as a dalit hero. However, Nair indicates that the massive response of dalit groups to the desecration of the Ambedkar statue by some youths in December 1995, as well as the changing landscape of the city, dotted with Ambedkar statues are evidence of the growing use of symbols by dalit groups in an effort to re-territorialise the city (2000b, no date, 2003a).

The Janasahayog and CIVIC survey (2003) suggests that there is a preponderance of dalit leaders in the slums of Bangalore - 60% of slum leaders in the 77 slums surveyed were dalit. However, the same survey also suggests that only 7% of the leaders were registered with dalit organisations. Nearly half of them were not members of any association, whereas about 42% were members of local

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<sup>15</sup> The Gokak agitation was around giving sole first language status to Kannada. The Cauvery riots were part of a larger struggle over jobs, land and water in southern Karnataka, expressed in terms of resentment against Tamil communities. See Nair (2000b, no date, 2003a); Niranjana (2000), Vyasulu (2000).

organisations. The survey by Janasahayog and APSA (no date) provides a similar picture with regard to ‘mass movement organisations’ – only 11% of slum leaders in Bangalore are affiliated with mass movement organisations (but it does not specify whether they are dalit or not).

While there are several dalit organisations and groups that operate in and out of Bangalore, given the relatively low membership of the leaders of slums with dalit mass movements, it would seem that there is a disjuncture, between dalit groups and the dalit communities living in the slums of Bangalore. However, I would suggest that to engage with a dalit politics in the city, we have to understand both the reasons for this disjuncture as well as the ways in which we can excavate the politics of a gendered dalit identity in the city. While this is what I attempt to do in the analytical chapters, I will also suggest that one has to examine the content of dalit politics in Karnataka to allow for such a possibility. Therefore, while flagging the groups that do operate in and out of Bangalore, I will return to the DSS to set the context for a gendered dalit politics in the city.

### ***Dalit Politics in Bangalore***

Dalit politics has a diverse set of inter-related groups that engage with a dalit political space in Bangalore. Therefore, from the various factions of the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi (DSS), to groups as localised as the Dalit Kranti Dal (operating out of the Peenya Industrial Estate), and other groups such as the Dalit Christian Federation, National Forum for Dalit Human Rights, Women’s Voice, the Samatha Sainik Dal (SSD), the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS) and the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvali (DMC) form part of the spectrum of dalit politics in



Bangalore. Apart from these groups, there are groups such as Guttuge Pourakarmikara Sangha and the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM) that represent specific group interests, such as the contract street cleaners and domestic workers. Still further, as is shown in the previous section, there are also groups such as Janasahayog, Slum Jagathu, APSA and some of the afore-mentioned dalit groups that work with the concerns of the urban poor, especially the communities that live in the slums of Bangalore. All of this wide community of NGOs and mass movements inform the politics in the slums of the city.

In this section, I want to situate dalit politics, as it was envisaged in the formative years of the DSS and thereafter, to contextualise the possibilities for a gendered dalit politics in the city, which I will go on to analyse in the next two chapters. The assumption is that the legacy of the dalit struggle, in its short and recently chequered history, provides the context for the analysis of dalit groups that came after, influenced as they are by the politics of the DSS, but at times either disillusioned with the DSS, or wanting to take specific issues neglected by the DSS into the political domain.

### *The Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS)*

Japhet, in his research on the dalit movement in Karnataka, has identified three phases of the dalit movement in the twentieth century: the first, the 'proto-dalit' movement of 1900-1930s (when groups based on caste identity were formed in the erstwhile Mysore presidency); the second the 'emergence of Ambedkarism' from the 1930 to the early 1970s (this, he suggests was the period where the ground was laid for the emergence of a radical dalit politics for groups such as the Dalit Panther



movement in Maharashtra and the DSS in Karnataka); and thirdly, the early 1970s to the present day, which is where the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS) finds its place (1997: 30-36).

The DSS as a cohesive whole has been the largest modern organised dalit mass movement in Karnataka. Started in the politically charged context of the mid-1970s, it sought to revolutionise caste politics in Karnataka. It has been argued by dalit academics such as Japhet, that unlike in the other states, the dalit movement in Karnataka was influenced by several social thinkers such as Marx, Lohia and Ambedkar and therefore communist, socialist and Ambedkar's radical caste politics influenced the shape and direction of the dalit movement (Chamaraj, K, 2001). Gail Omvedt connects the emergence of Lohiaite socialism in Karnataka in the 1950s with the peasant movement in Shimoga. She suggests that Lohiaism was a break both with 'Gandhian reformism and the mechanical Marxist focus on "class" which until then had affected all sections of socialists in India' (1994: 272). Arguing that neither Ambedkarism nor Marxism had much force before recent decades in Karnataka, she suggests however, that Lohiaism 'did not come into Karnataka as an ideology of full-scale Dalit liberation but rather as a reformist trend which was in some ways compatible with the liberal co-optation patterns that have been established in the "Ram-Raj" atmosphere of the state' (Omvedt, 1994: 277).

While Lohiaism, Marxism and Ambedkarism were to influence dalit politics in the years to come, there were several events that led up to the registration of the DSS under the leadership of B Krishnappa in Bhadravathi in 1974, the most climactic of

which is known as the 'Bhusa' episode (Japhet, 1997; Mane, 1994; Chamaraj, 2001; Yadav, 1999) . As Japhet recites:

A belligerent and popular leader of Dalits, B Basavalingappa, then, a minister in the cabinet of Devaraj Urs, Chief Minister of Karnataka, had described the entire history of Kannada literature as cattle feed [bhusa], for it had no relevance to the lives of lower castes. This comment triggered off a strong conservative reaction, which snowballed into a series of well organised attacks on untouchable students, mostly in Bangalore and also in several parts of the State. Provoked by such an intolerant caste Hindu response, the Dalit intellectuals decided to come together to launch a movement of their own. (Japhet, 1997: 37)

There are many struggles that the DSS is and has been a part of over the past thirty years, most notably struggles around land rights, against bonded labour, the violent atrocities linked to the 'indignity of untouchability', against the *devadasi* system and against the rape and sexual violence visited upon dalit women (Pinto, 1995, 1996; Assadi and Rajendran, 2000; Japhet, 1997). It is widely understood that one of the defining moments of dalit politics in Karnataka was the Anasuyamma episode in 1979 which involved the *kumbara* community, classified as 'backward', but not 'untouchable' (Japhet, 1997; Sreedharan and Muniyappa, no date).

The DSS took up the issues of the brutal murder of Kumbara Sheshagiriappa and the gang rape of his daughter Anasuyamma. This violence was inflicted on Sheshagiriappa and Anasuyamma because Sheshagiriappa had opposed the usurpation of land belonging to him by the dominant *vokkaliga* community in the village of Hunasikote in Kolar taluk. The DSS demanded the arrest of the perpetrators of the violence, as many of them were not arrested by the police because of the political clout of the *vokkaliga* community. When about 500 processionists, dedicated by the DSS, marched to Bangalore to a Vidhana Soudha (legislative



council) in session, with the symbolic *jyothi*<sup>16</sup> of Sheshagiriappa demanding justice, they were *lathi*-charged and many of the leaders were arrested (Sreedharan and Muniyappa, no date).

The Anasuyamma episode was a defining moment in early DSS history for several reasons. Japhet (1997) suggests that the Anasuyamma episode provoked a broadening of the base of the DSS amongst non ‘untouchable’ castes. As Japhet puts it, this ‘meant a political[ly] ambitious project of expanding the definition of Dalits to include the non-Dalit poor castes as well’ (1997: 75). Tracing the various contestations around the term ‘dalit’ in the early years of the movement, he says:

The very act of defining Dalit identity, in the beginning, had to negotiate with the problem of defining the boundaries of the communities of Dalits. Inevitably, there was an element of creative ambiguity in the act of defining who the Dalits were. As an element of non-negotiable boundary, Dalits, basically meant the collection of untouchable castes. (1997: 75)

However, part of these engagements with a politics of naming were around the consolidation of ‘untouchable’ caste identities under the rubric of a ‘dalit’ identity.

As Japhet observes:

The internal caste-wise tensions between the left and right castes of untouchables – holeyas and madigas - have left a deep mark on the organisational structure of the DSS. It goes to the credit of the Dalit movement that it has determinedly fought all such animosities within the larger community of untouchables. (1997: 41, 42).

Therefore, apart from the non-negotiable boundary of ‘untouchable’ communities in the processes of definition of dalit identity, the DSS also actively sought to consolidate *holeya* and *madiga* communities with the conception of a unified and political dalit identity. The question of the ‘unity’ of the two ‘untouchable’ communities, however, was to become a politically charged issue in the coming

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<sup>16</sup> A torch lit from his funeral pyre.



years of the dalit struggle, which I shall examine in Chapters 4 and 5, especially Chapter 4.

Japhet suggests that through the course of the 1980s and the 1990s, the DSS began to articulate a particular understanding of dalit identity. They were influenced by the micro-struggles of the movement, and especially with the pivotal moments of the ‘Anasuyamma episode’:

The Dalit movement was politically imaginative enough to enhance the epistemic boundaries of the Dalit identity, so as to include other poor and backward communities also [...] To put it in Marxist terms, the politics of caste identity ought to inscribe it in a clearly identifiable class content. One of the fundamental theoretical assumptions of the radical subaltern caste movements has been that the class and caste merge with each other in the lower echelons of the pyramid of the caste system. (1997: 76)

The argument that Japhet makes is that with the ‘Anasuyamma episode’, the dalit movement was able to focus on ‘the trinity of themes of exploitation in rural society – caste, class and gender’ by situating the particular violence in terms of the violence of feudal structures. He suggests that what gave radical force to the dalit struggle was the strategy of focussing on the *direct physical violence* of feudalism as well as the ways in which the struggle came to centre around the themes of caste, class and gender:

[The dalit struggle against the ‘Anasuyamma episode’] proved that the sources of caste and patriarchal violence have the same origin, a position with which the socialist-feminist can hardly disagree. [Further, it] also launched the programme of political unity of [...] caste and class, a position which stays central to the Dalit movement even today. (1997: 77-78)

Japhet therefore suggests that there were several aspects to the creative engagement of the dalit movement with micro-level struggles. At the macro level, it brought about an enhancement of the boundaries of dalit identity to include other ‘backward’ communities. This was done, in significant part, through an engagement with the

feudal structures of village society. Not only did this provide the political unity for caste and class struggles, it also allowed for an understanding of the interconnectedness of caste and patriarchal violence. Japhet acknowledges, however, that dalit women's participation in various decision making processes of the DSS has been almost negligible, even as he argues that 'at the local level, there have been many women's issues which have either been taken up by the DSS or supported by it' (1997: 78).

One of the arguments that I want to make about DSS politics, taken from Japhet (1997) as well as Nagaraj's account (1993), is the centrality of the village and rural society in the politics of the DSS. For instance, when Japhet argues (1997: 89-91) that the ways in which the DSS sought to distinguish itself from class-based struggles was through the epistemic centrality it sought to give to symbols, he also explains the nature of the labour that the majority of dalit struggles contested in a village economy:

1. Forms of labour embedded in the day to day life of rural society such as removing the carcass of cows.
2. Struggles against the roles allotted to Untouchables in the master-rituals of villages. (1997: 91)

Japhet argues that dalit politics gave the 'right ideological validation' to the Ambedkarite position that 'village India was a hell-hole for the poor and lower castes' (1997: 71). In Japhet's account, 'caste is so central to rural life that nothing is free from that' (1997: 60). The argument that I want to make is that the village is central to dalit politics, not only in terms of the physical location of dalit struggles, but also in terms of its centrality in the dalit imaginary; the village is the source of symbolic violence and caste is synonymous with rural life.

While DR Nagaraj (1993: 31-41) does not specifically locate the centrality of the village in the dalit imaginary in his analysis of the dalit movement, he locates the centrality of a particular conception of the village when he argues for a radical reconstruction of the village in the dalit movement. In his analysis of the dalit movement in Karnataka, he argues that the contradictions between the perceptions of the village by Gandhi and Ambedkar are replicated in the contradictions in the perceptions of the village between the farmer's movement and the dalit movement:

[...] the Dalit Movement cannot yet accept the notion of the undifferentiated village as a politically legitimate category of thought and action. (1993: 42)

What I would suggest is that this provides an insight into the ways in which dalit political discourse engages not just with the conception of the urban space, but also how it obtains in the city of Bangalore. I will interrogate this further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Japhet, in his account of the dalit movement in Karnataka, also demonstrates the ways in which the Lohiaite, Ambedkarite and Marxist streams influenced the dalit movement (DSS) through the three decades of its existence. He makes a distinction between the Lohiaite influence that allowed for the broadening of the base of dalit politics to encompass a united front of dalits, minorities and backward classes; and the substantive aspects of Lohiaism as practised in Karnataka, which he suggests did not allow for a cohesion of 'symbolic/cultural' and 'substantive/structural' aspects of dalit exploitation (1997: 132, 133).

Further, he argues that the dalit movement in Karnataka, unlike its Maharashtrian counterpart, did not have a monolithic understanding of Hinduism. Instead it evolved



a practice of 'multiple choices' in relation to Hinduism. However, he locates both Lohiaite and Ambedkarite paradigms as invariably engaged in symbolic battles over cultural issues while dalit activists of Marxist orientation were interested in an analysis of untouchability and its consequences as feudal exploitation and violence. A synthesis was achieved between the two streams through an understanding of the links between feudalism and Hinduism (1997: 137-141). Therefore, he suggests:

The first decade of the Dalit movement can be described as a synthesis of class conflict and cultural approaches to the Dalit question. The creative innovation lied [sic] in the Dalit movement, ability to present a Marxist formulation couched in cultural categories. (1997: 139)

Japhet suggests that the second decade of the dalit movement saw an attempt by the dalit movement to transcend its own Ambedkarite paradigm. This was a decade when the DSS launched a symbolic Gandhian action which Japhet suggests, is sometimes remembered for its 'dilution of radical dalit politics'<sup>17</sup>. It was also a decade when the DSS was involved in struggles against privatisation and liberalisation, whilst the third decade was characterised by fierce internal debates and polemics (Japhet, 1997: 142-146). Therefore, having made promising beginnings claiming the support of over a million people in the early 1990s (Mane, 1994: 109), in 1996 the DSS saw one of its most significant splits. There were several reasons for the split, ranging from the tensions between the Ambekarites, Lohiaites and Marxists to the involvement of the DSS with real politick and the debates around the dalit Christian question (Japhet, 1997: 38).

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<sup>17</sup> Called the *Gutuku Neeru Karyakrama*, and the brain child of Devanooru Mahadeva, then Convenor of the DSS, the action centred on the politics of gesture: 'untouchables' held a pot of water and asked the caste Hindus to drink from it (Japhet, 1997: 143).

While the split saw two factions, the Jayanna faction and the DG Sagar faction battle for legitimacy as the 'real' DSS for several years, in more recent years, the groups have seen even more schisms. In the January of 2001, another significant split came with a breakaway group, under the leadership of Mavalli Shankar, starting the Ambedkar Vichara (Deccan Herald, March 15, 2003). While there have been several calls for unity, and while the several groups do come together in political solidarity, the many groups continue to represent the quagmire of contestations in current dalit politics. In the next chapter, I locate the current contestations around dalit identity amongst three different groups in Bangalore.

The early history and processes of the DSS allowed for the broadening of the boundaries of the category of 'dalit' to include 'backward' classes with an analysis of the violence of feudal structures, while holding onto the non-negotiable boundary of 'untouchable' communities. The DSS sought to consolidate the *holeya* and *madiga* identities under the broad rubric of dalit identity. Further, with an understanding of socialist/Hindu patriarchy, the DSS sought to provide the basis for a cohesive politics of caste and gender. It seems that the village and rural India have been central in the dalit imaginary, as well as substantively in dalit politics in Karnataka. While Lohiaite, Ambedkarite and Marxist streams have influenced the dalit movement, they have also provided points of fissure between various factions of the movement, thereby leaving a highly contested dalit political field in Karnataka.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to lay out a brief history of Bangalore to provide a background for the caste, linguistic, spatial and gendered divisions that existed prior to independence. In the first section I set out the caste based division of labour in the textile industry of the eighteenth century. In 1799, the British gained control of the princely state of Mysore. By the first decade of the 1800s, they had set up a civil and military station in the eastern edge of the old city, which they maintained as ‘an isolated British territory’ by controlling the residence of communities (it was mostly non-Mysorean communities that lived in the cantonment), as well as regulating economic activity between the city and the cantonment.

In the years following the de-industrialised period of the nineteenth century, a few large textile mills were set up in the old city. These textile mills drew their labour, not from the traditional weaving castes of the eighteenth century textile industry, but from a range of other castes. Further, the labouring communities were separated, not just in terms of caste from each other, but also from the dominant caste, middle class communities that lived in the affluent southern and eastern parts of the city.

*Non-brahmin* politics in Mysore became a political force in the early part of the twentieth century. While it was influenced by the *non-brahmin* politics of Madras presidency, it took different forms in Mysore. While there were some radical dalit leaders in the *non-brahmin* movement, and while there were several ‘lower’ caste groups that were being formed in this period, this period is marked by Gandhian,



British and princely paternalism with social reform policies that tempered the radical edge of the 'proto-dalit' movement.

After independence, the city came to be dominated by the several public sector enterprises proliferating in a city characterised as a 'science city' because of the many research and development institutions that it spawned. The city had a flavour as the 'garden city' and as a middle class city because of the relative invisibility of the labouring communities, as well as a pride in the producing communities involved in the public sector. Through the years of liberalisation, the city's conception as a 'science city' was seen as sending it 'naturally' on course to becoming the silicon valley of the world. Along with the policies of liberalisation came the dream of making Bangalore an ideal destination for corporate investment. Aiming to be a hi-tech city like Singapore, there was a private-public partnership drawn up between the government and the IT sector. While there were several projects aimed at securing corporate interest in the city through investment in infrastructure, the registers of the imagined and remembered city allowed for increasing middle class citizen's initiatives in clearing public spaces (of slums and footpath vendors), improving garbage disposal and dealing with traffic issues.

The slums of the city provide a stark contrast to the aspirations of governmental planning, the entrepreneurial dreams of the IT sector as well as the remembered and imagined registers of Bangalore's citizenry. The latest official figures put the number of slums at 1.85 million, about 26% of the population of Bangalore. While there is a preponderance of dalit communities in the slums of Bangalore, the slums are also largely populated by (possibly dalit) Christian, Muslim and other backward classes.

Further, there is a large number of (possibly rural migrant) Tamil, Kannada, Urdu and Telugu speaking communities living in the slums of Bangalore. However, it has been suggested that more recent migrants to the city are from the northern parts of the state. Slum communities do not have easy access to basic facilities such as water and sanitation. They also live under the threat of eviction, heightened by the recent increase in tempo of the interests of various stakeholders in the visions for Bangalore. In such a context, slum politics stands as a politics that fights for the legitimacy of the poor in urban spaces, as well as the legitimacy of the claims for secure tenure, basic facilities, and changes in policy related to land use, amongst other claims. Whilst linguistic and dalit politics have increasingly been using symbols to re-territorialise the city, the focus of slum politics is on the economic context of the urban poor.

There are several dalit groups that work in and out of Bangalore. I examine the early politics of the DSS to situate the influences on a dalit politics in the context of the city. The DSS has engaged with the dalit identity in several ways, taking in the diverse influences of Ambedkarism, Lohiaism and Marxism. They have broadened the epistemic boundaries to include backward classes, while holding onto the non-negotiable boundaries of 'untouchable' castes. They have sought to consolidate 'untouchable' communities under the rubric of the term 'dalit'. They have also sought to find a common ground for caste and gendered violence. I have also suggested that the village and rural India are central to both a dalit politics in Karnataka as well as the symbolic imaginary of dalit politics.

From the accounts of slum and dalit politics in this chapter, it seems that there is a priority given to redistributive strategies in slum politics. In relation to dalit politics, while there have been attempts to integrate caste, class and gender, the tensions between the Ambedkarites, Lohiaites and Marxist factions of the DSS attest to the contestations between redistributive and recognition strategies in dalit politics in Karnataka. Moreover, dalit political imagination as evidenced by the DSS continues to equate caste with rural life. In such a context, it becomes imperative to locate a *dalit* politics in the context of the city of Bangalore. This is what I turn to in the next chapter.



## Chapter 4

# Contested Dalithood: Locating Dalit Politics in Contemporary Bangalore

### Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to locate the tensions in analysing a gendered account of caste relations in the city of Bangalore. Though the ambit of most of the groups I interacted with is not framed in terms of the explicit transformation of caste relations *in the city*, I analyse the specific politics of the groups to illuminate caste relations in the city as well as assaying a gendered analysis of caste relations in Bangalore. To this end, in this chapter, I examine the politics around naming of identity and the purposes for which the groups were set up. More specifically, this chapter is about the ways in which ‘dalit’ identity has been avowed, disavowed, contested and sometimes not confronted at all, by the groups and what this means for a dalit politics as well as a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore.

Therefore, in this chapter, I examine the research question around how the label ‘dalit’ is applied, to which specific groups, in what ways and to what effects. I also examine how different groups use the label (and how they otherwise label themselves) and whether they have any stakes in claiming or disclaiming dalit identity.

The specific groups that I examine in this chapter are the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM), Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (Group for the

Struggle for Madiga Reservation - MRHS) and the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvalli (Dalit and Women's Movement - DMC). I examine the processes of self-identification as well as the processes of identification by others and the effects this has for a gendered dalit politics. I examine the quagmire of opinions on what *jatis*/class come under the rubric of the terms of identification and under what circumstances for each of these groups. I then examine whether this process of self-definition is gendered, in terms of the specific mandate of the group and the strategies that it employs.

The DMC, given that it is a 'movement', has a broad political mandate: to struggle for a transformation in gendered and caste relations. The DMC has, in recent years, rejected the term *dalit* and taken on the identity of *talasthara* (foundation) as more reflective of its identity as a group. I analyse the processes of the DMC that led to this shift, thereby opening the space for an analysis of the many, sometimes contradictory positions that its members can take. While acknowledging the space opened up by the DMC for gendered understandings of dalit politics, I suggest that this space is limited by its investments in an egalitarian dalit ideal.

The MRHS, on the other hand, has set itself the specific mandate of procuring reservations for *madiga* people from the state, for jobs and in education. However, while espousing the cause of a specific group amongst the broader dalit community, there still seems to be a lot at stake in holding onto the notion of a dalit brotherhood. I suggest that while members of the MRHS may have differing investments in the term 'dalit', where they are seemingly united is in the political goal of achieving differential reservations within the dalit community. I analyse the tensions in having

such a limited mandate, as well as the absence of a gendered analysis. Still further, I analyse the stakes involved in MRHS politics.

With the KDWM, 'caste' is not a frame of reference for their politics<sup>1</sup>. Domestic work is the category around which the group has mobilised. This has meant that the politicising of dalit identity and its link to domestic work is new terrain. Given that nearly all of the domestic workers that I met were dalit women, I suggest that the women at KDWM offer a particular insight into the dalit condition in Bangalore: one that does not necessarily deal with the politicised categories of 'dalit'. The KDWM, given its political mandate of a change in the working conditions of domestic workers, sets up an unresolved tension between the various identities of the women.

I intend to analyse the politics of identity in each of these groups to illuminate gendered caste relations in the city. I do this using Fraser's perspectival dualism. By using the analytical categories of culture and economics, I examine the identity politics of each of the groups, so that I can place each strategy that they employ in terms of Fraser's matrix of recognition, redistribution, affirmation and transformation. This is so that I can bring out in each instance if and whether there is a tension in terms of Fraser's recognition-redistribution dilemma. Underlying this analysis is the perception that understanding caste, gender and class as bivalent collectivities, (i.e. that we can trace the primary 'harms' in each instance to both

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I would like to make a distinction (that I have indicated in Chapter 2) between the domestic workers themselves and the KDWM as a body interested in organising domestic workers. When I refer to the KDWM not taking into account caste relations, I indicate that it is the organisation of the KDWM, not the women themselves.



culture and economics), allows for examining the complexity of the caste relations in the city.

In this chapter therefore, I analyse DMC's politics of disavowal of the term *dalit*, tracing the trajectory of the terms that the DMC chooses to engage with, in preference to the term 'dalit'. After that, I examine the politics of the MRHS and the tensions involved in agitating for separate reservations, even while having a stake in dalit politics. I also examine the ways in which the women at the Karnataka Domestic Workers' Movement (KDWM) understand their particular identity. Before that I want to contextualise the politics that the groups are engaged in, by a brief analysis of the difficulties that the term 'dalit' has thrown up. This next section is not about tracing a genealogy of the term; instead it is about engaging with particular popular usages, to bring out the difficulties and the tensions that exist in a politics of naming identity and injustice.

## **The Term 'Dalit' and its Fissures**

The history of the term 'dalit' has been traced to the 1930s as a Marathi/Hindi translation of the British term 'depressed classes' (Omvedt, 1995: 77; Webster, 1999: 68). It has been variously understood to mean 'oppressed, downtrodden, broken' (Webster, 1999: 68; Basu, 2002a: xxv). Ambedkar is said to be the first to use the term<sup>2</sup> and its English version, 'broken people'. However, it was only in the 1970s that it was revived into popular political usage by the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra

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<sup>2</sup> Guru (1998: 16) and (Basu, 2002a: xxv); Ambedkar himself used the terms 'depressed classes' and 'scheduled castes' more frequently (Webster, 1999: 68). Basu (2002a), along with Guru (1998) suggests however, that finally in an attempt to politically radicalize his own social group, he used the term 'pad dalit' – 'meaning those who were completely crushed under the feet of the Hindu social order' (Guru, 1998: 16; Basu, 2002a: xxvi).

and then by the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS) in Karnataka (Omvedt, 1995; Guru, 1998; Webster, 1999; Basu, 2002a). The term continues to stand in defiance to other modes of identification: 'untouchables', Scheduled Castes and Gandhi's *harijan* (people of God). It is, however, not alone in a process of self-identification; nor is it free from criticism. More recently, the terms, *bahujan* (majority) and *dalit-bahujan* have gained currency; this is in addition to the various *adi* (foremost) - movements, that have historically popularised terms such as *Adi-Jambava*, *Adi-Karnataka*, *Adi-Dravida* (Omvedt, 1994; Aloysius, 1997).

To understand why the term 'dalit' is not necessarily free from criticism or contestation (Guru, 1998: 15), we must analyse particular modes in which the term has been understood. Webster, in his analysis of the category 'dalit', suggests that there are two predominant ways of understanding dalit communities. One is a class analysis that subsumes dalits within class or occupational categories such as peasants, agricultural workers, etc., and the other is a communal analysis which centres Hindu society (1999: 68-69). Webster's interest in the term is in analysing the exclusion of Christian and Muslim dalit communities from its ambit. On the other hand, Gopal Guru locates a critique of the term amongst dalit middle classes who, he suggests, argue that the category 'forces dalits to carry the load of their historical past' (Guru, 1998: 15). Guru also locates another critique of the term 'dalit' by Ashis Nandy, who suggests that the term 'dalit' is a social construction of the middle class, is ascriptive in its connotations and does not allow for a conceptualisation of the cultural moorings of dalit communities such as traditional craft and skill (Guru, 1998: 16-18).



While Guru refutes each of these criticisms in turn, I suggest that these contestations elucidate the tensions that exist in dalit politics at two levels: one in terms of a politics of naming injustice, and the other in terms of a politics of transformation. To elaborate, I will start with a particular understanding of 'dalithood'. Gopal Guru writes that in his fortnightly *Bahiskrit Bharat*, Ambedkar defined the term 'dalit' comprehensively:

Dalithood is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of the lower castes by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order. (as quoted in Guru, 1998: 16)

In this understanding, Ambedkar keeps caste relations central to the analysis of the term 'dalit'. By speaking of 'lower' castes, he does not necessarily restrict himself to 'untouchable' communities. He holds an understanding of caste relations that centres the oppression of certain 'dalit' communities in terms of a particular oppressor - the upper caste *brahminical* order. If we were to use the analytical categories of culture and economics to understand his account of injustice, dalithood would be a bivalent collectivity. One can trace primary harms of both economic exploitation, and cultural suppression and marginalization to the *brahminical* social order. Therefore, dalit communities suffer both the injustices of misrecognition and maldistribution. While this account excludes an analysis of dalit Christian and dalit Muslim communities, because of the ways in which it centres Brahminism-Hinduism, it does firmly foreground *caste relations*.<sup>3</sup> However, I suggest that it is an understanding of Brahminism and Hinduism as a mode of economic, political, cultural and social

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<sup>3</sup> I want to suggest that centring *brahminism* allows for a particular understanding of patriarchy, a *brahminical* patriarchy, because of which women and dalits suffer. Just as socialist feminism allows for a specific analysis that ties class and gender tightly together, analyses of *brahminical* patriarchy do the same with caste and gender. Both modes of analysis, however, have very particular presumptions as well as exclusions.



ordering of society, that then *allows* for an analysis that no longer centres caste relations.

To illustrate, in their highly influential 1973 manifesto, the Dalit Panthers proffered an expansive definition of 'dalits' to include 'members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the land-less and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion' (Omvedt, 1995: 72). In this account, by collapsing caste, class, gender and religion under one umbrella, injustice is defined in the broadest frame. All sorts of injustices of misrecognition and maldistribution are invoked, so much so that the term 'dalit' has value in terms of an important sense of solidarity, but not necessarily in terms of either naming primary harms or in strategies of transformation.

While there are contestations on what such an account privileges, especially in the substantive context of the politics of the Dalit Panthers (Rege, 1998, 2000; Omvedt, 1993; see Chapter 1), there are also debates on what such a *naming* privileges. For instance, Webster suggests that such an understanding tends to privilege class analyses (1999: 69), and Omvedt argues that it brings caste and class together, through an understanding of *Hinduism* as feudal backwardness (1995: 72-80). However, this mode of analysis completely silences the subject of the dalit woman. It allows no conceptual space for the dalit woman. This analysis therefore, is emblematic of the dilemmas that haunt dalit politics: how is one to analyse caste, class and gender together?

To clarify the distinction between Ambedkar's account and that of the Dalit Panthers' manifesto, the manifesto's definition of 'dalit' does not centre *caste relations*, whereas Ambedkar's account does. Omvedt has argued that in Ambedkar's time, the contrast between caste and class was drawn in terms of a distinction between culture and economics. The further argument that she makes, is that this distinction (between culture and economics in terms of caste and class respectively) is what separates the dalit politics of the 1970s and 1980s from that of Ambedkar's time. Therefore, she argues that the 'dalit movements' of the 1970s and 80s sought to *unify* economic and cultural oppression (Omvedt, 1995: 75). Her underlying argument is that *caste* based analysis tends to privilege cultural differentiation, and that to analyse the economic injustices that dalit communities suffer, one has to combine a caste-class analysis. I will examine this analysis in the context of the DSS engagement with the term 'dalit'.

While I have already drawn an account of DSS's engagement with the term 'dalit' in the previous chapter, I would like to return to it to place the debate around dalit identity firmly in Karnataka and in Bangalore. Japhet suggests that the dalit movements in Karnataka more or less adopted the same meanings of the term 'dalit' as the Dalit Panthers. More specifically, however, in the context of Karnataka, creative ambiguity in terms of 'who' was dalit allowed the DSS, as Japhet argues, to make certain simultaneous moves. Their attempt was to consolidate *holeya* and *madiga* identities and enhance the boundaries to include poor and 'backward' communities while holding onto a non-negotiable boundary of dalits being a collection of 'untouchable castes'. One of the presumptions that held this understanding together was that down the pyramid of the caste system, caste and



class merge with each other (Japhet, 1997: 74-75). The connections between different structures such as caste and class, are also extended to an analysis between caste and gender. Therefore, Japhet suggests that the DSS understands gender in terms of the similarity of origins of both caste and patriarchal violence (Japhet, 1997: 78). What holds this account together, as suggested earlier, are the cultural constructions of dalit people and women by a *brahminical* patriarchy.

In Japhet's account, to reiterate, there is a unity that can be drawn between caste, class and gender. An analysis of *brahminical* patriarchy holds the accounts of caste and gender together; and an understanding of the division of labour in caste communities allows for the congruence of caste and class at the bottom of the caste pyramid. In Japhet's account, dalit politics stands or falls based on how well it holds these three collectivities together (Japhet, 1997: 79).

If we were to scrutinise these arguments in terms of Fraser's framework, starting with the connections between caste and class, we could argue that the DSS analysis of the injustice of maldistribution ties poor and backward communities with 'untouchable communities'. The other connected argument is that the DSS understands *caste communities* as being hard-wired to a division of labour; so much so that down the caste order, caste communities suffer more injuries of maldistribution, such that untouchable communities are the poorest. Therefore, there is a hierarchy set up in terms of caste and class with the argument that they are not really very different collectivities. Why then is it important to emphasise that they merge with each other? What is the purpose of the creative ambiguity in relation to poor people, 'backward' communities and women?



The strength of the DSS and dalit movements in general has been to analyse the cultural aspects of the injustices that dalit people endure (Japhet, 1997: 89-121); therefore, to centre misrecognition, where only injuries of maldistribution were acknowledged. This has not meant that the DSS is not concerned with distributive aspects of justice: the land reform struggles, which are a hallmark of the DSS, are indicative of this. However, by then consolidating *holeya*, *madiga*, poor and backward community (and gendered) identities, does the DSS limit the ways in which the injustice of misrecognition can be identified? What are the effects of analysing caste communities as being hard-wired to the village economy? Is this in conflict with a 'class' analysis where non-'untouchable' people can be identified as poor?

I would argue that the term 'dalit' in these accounts, holds differing and sometimes contradictory aspects of recognition and redistribution for its different constituents. In effect, there is a recognition-redistribution dilemma contained in the identity of 'dalit-hood'. We have to ask the questions though of whether, and if so how, invoking dalit identity addresses this dilemma. It is important therefore, to see how the different groups that I interacted with take all of this on board for their own politics. I return to the questions set out here after I examine the politics of each of the groups, in the conclusion.

I will suggest, however, that while it is important to historicise the arguments of caste and class based struggles, if we use culture and economics as *analytical* categories, we will be able to better understand *caste* as a bivalent collectivity.

Thereby, we will be able to illuminate the relationship between caste and class, especially in the context of the city. This means asking questions of, and making distinctions between an analysis that hard-wires the division of labour in society to caste communities, and one that does not. What this means is that we can hold onto the understanding that there is a division of labour within caste communities, but that this does not necessarily explain all division of labour within society, whether that be in gendered terms, or in terms of *class*. What this further allows for is an analysis of cultural valuational differentiations *within* dalit communities.

### **DMC: From *dalit* to *talasthara***

The Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvalli (the dalit and women's movement) - DMC has had a critical and dynamic engagement with the term 'dalit'. This engagement can be traced and understood through the trajectories of self-definition that the group has followed over the last several years. They began by first labelling themselves the Janandolana Samithi (People's Movement Group) in the early 1990s, and they later changed their name to the 'Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvalli' (the Dalit and Women's Movement), characterising the shift in focus of their activities and ideological positioning. Though it continues to be called the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvalli, the group has come a long way in their association with the term 'dalit' as well as in their politics of self-definition.

In this following section, I trace the trajectory of DMC's self-definitions starting with their engagement with the term 'dalit', and how they came to reject it. From there, I briefly examine their involvement with the term '*kula-samudaya*' (caste-community) and why they moved away from that as well. At present, it seems the DMC has



reached a level of comfort in their politics by claiming the term '*talasthara*' (foundation) as their own. I provide an analysis of each of the terms of self-definition used by the DMC by using the analytical categories of culture and economics to trace the primary harms that they tacitly identify in each process of self-definition. I then ask whether there is a recognition-redistribution dilemma in their politics, by locating the purposes and strategies behind the self-definition in terms of Fraser's matrix of recognition, redistribution, affirmation and transformation. The purpose of this analysis is to unravel the tensions in locating a 'dalit' feminist politics, as well as providing the basis for an analysis of caste relations in the city.

### *DMC's Rejection of the Term 'Dalit'*

A critique of dalit politics in terms of *who* is dalit has been part of dalit politics in Karnataka for some time now<sup>4</sup>. The DMC too engages with a critique of the term. However, their emphasis is on the *misrecognition* of dalit communities. Therefore, as I shall show, DMC's critique and rejection of the term dalit is not about inclusion and exclusion of communities within the umbrella of dalit, but is about whether or not the term dalit offers an adequate account of caste relations, and what meanings it offers for a transformative politics. Explaining the difficulty that the DMC has with the term, Yashodha of the DMC says:

The term dalit has become a problem for me. People at DMC think so as well. It has come from the system. It is not a term that activists and people in movements have obtained... 'dalit' means people who have been oppressed, exploited, broken people, low people, people of lower status, lower caste people, people that have to be emancipated. That is the concept within which the term has come about. It is from the language Pali and 'dali' means 'broken' thing. That meaning has been forced upon us. If we have to understand the politics of this, then we have to reject the term dalit, because in this system all that is happening to us, if we have the strength to understand these machinations, we also have to understand and reject the term. (Yashoda, DMC office)



The history of the term dalit has, as I have mentioned before, been understood in the context of other terms such as 'harijan'. While the differences between the terms 'harijan' and 'dalit' have been much discussed in dalit politics, especially in the context of the larger debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar<sup>5</sup>, I will argue that the various engagements with characterising the dalit condition flow from the recognition-redistribution dilemma that Fraser lays out. The DMC's rejection of the term dalit is a specific formulation of this dilemma. The tensions in articulating specific harms has recently meant, and this is true of the DMC as I shall show, a turn away from 'structural analysis' that centres structures and creates victims. The tensions crystallise around the simultaneous moves of articulating and naming specific harms and envisaging transformative possibilities.

Yashoda's account of 'dalithood', first of all highlights the symbolic violence of the thrown-ness of identity<sup>6</sup>. Dalit communities find themselves *thrown* into a particular identity. This is not an engagement with a process of self-identification where one *claims* an identity. Instead it is about how other people identify you through a process of 'othering' and symbolic violence. Further, the understanding that Yashoda proffers on behalf of the DMC, is that the term 'dalit' creates/becomes that which it names<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 3, where I argue that one of the reasons for the split in the DSS is around 'dalit Christian identity'; the issue was whether or not dalit Christians were dalits.

<sup>5</sup> One of the crucial differences between the two terms has been understood in the context of the sense of self of subaltern communities; while the term harijan draws on a religio-spiritual language and urges a spiritual change within (especially dominant caste) communities, the term dalit invokes a language of anger, and places caste relations in terms of a structural change in society. This, it has been argued has also found form in the particular languages employed by dalit literature in Kannada (See especially Aloysius, 1997, DR Nagaraj, 1993; Japhet, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Iris Marion Young (1990: 46).

<sup>7</sup> See Gedalof's analysis of Butler's understanding of performativity (1999: 99).

To elaborate, in their analyses, the term 'dalit', with its meanings of 'broken', 'low', 'oppressed', 'exploited', implies a caste hierarchy which, for them, marks a static and binding association with the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Therefore, the term 'dalit' reifies their particular 'caste position'. In effect, the term 'dalit' essentialises caste identities. The DMC reads this act of naming as a political act, which they associate with the 'system'. The question of *who* does the naming is central to the DMC's identification of the thrown-ness of dalit identity. The solution then is to reject the system, and with it the term 'dalit', that creates them as abject, hapless and unworthy. It seems it cannot be any other way because of the implication of the subjugation of the subaltern subject within the term. Their underlying assumption is that the term offers no transformative potential for them and therefore they *refuse* to take it. To keep open the possibility of a transformative politics in such a context, they have to reject the term and the politics that reiterates their position in the hierarchy.

Can we read DMC's rejection of the term as a radical deconstructive politics of recognition? Are they misreading an act of naming injustice or are they destabilising caste relations? How are we to understand the primacy that they give to the 'agency' of subaltern communities? And where is the injustice of maldistribution in this scheme? Is the recognition-redistribution dilemma contained in DMC's presumption that a performative rejection of the term will transform caste relations? Or is the dilemma in not recognising that caste relations are exploitative? I will return to these questions after I examine the processes of re-definition that the DMC undertook.



The task the DMC was faced with, once they had rejected the term dalit, was to then re-define themselves. Since ‘agency’ is integral to their vision of themselves, the redefinition would have to be one which radically transformed the caste hierarchy by foregrounding the agency of its subaltern subjects. An analysis of dalits as ‘broken’, as ‘oppressed’, relies on a particular analysis of caste hierarchy. Therefore, to dismantle an understanding of themselves as low, as oppressed, meant a dismantling of that caste hierarchy. The DMC went about this exercise of re-conceptualisation by presenting a different analysis of the existence of communities. A necessary part of this exercise, I argue, which is also a part of the DMC ethos, is a re-inscription of themselves, and in particular their agencies, *as individuals* in their communities.

The deconstructive nature of DMC’s politics, in which even ‘dalit’ politics is up for scrutiny, has radical potential for destabilising caste relations. The DMC shows promise in this in many respects: their accounts of untouchability and their analysis of food practices (see Chapter 5). However, with their concept of *kula-samudaya*, which I shall examine in the next section, they constantly stand on the brink of a regressive ‘politics of difference’ that essentialise identities. Having said that, there is a distinction to be made between the ‘system’ that the DMC sets up as holding everything that dalit communities are not, and an analysis that completely decentres the system by re-claiming identities as their own.

### ***Kula-samudaya: Equality in Difference?***

It is with the specific purpose of centring the dalit subject as agent, as actively shaping caste relations, that the DMC’s explorations led them to an understanding of castes as being ‘*kula-samudayas*’ (caste communities). As Rani recites, ‘we started



off with wanting to understand castes, but as our thinking got deeper, we felt that we needed to go into the concept of *kula-samudaya*...' (interview, DMC office). Yashoda elaborates on the meaning of *kula-samudaya*: 'What *kula-samudaya* means is, I am part of a *kula*<sup>8</sup>, you are a part of a *kula*, altogether, we form society (*samudaya*). Community,... without that, you and I cannot exist, so together, many *kulas* form a community' (interview, DMC office).

While the term *kula* can be understood as demarcating caste communities by restricting relationships between communities, it places caste communities in a hierarchy, as Lakshamma of the DMC does: 'for instance, if a girl has to be married to a boy, we need to look at the *kula-gotrane* (lineage/descent)' (interview, DMC office). The resistant reading that others at the DMC offer is related to understanding *kulas* as *different*: 'the system has recognised terms such as SCs, STs, OBCs. We reject terms such as that. There are different *kulas* though. Our *kula* is different, others' *kulas* are different' (Yashoda, interview, DMC office).

How does the DMC sustain this resistant reading of the term *kula*? Expanding on the meaning of *kula*, Yashoda says:

*Kulas* are different, *kula* depends on culture, lives, our food...as a *holeya*, I eat beef...the *holeyas* that are here are elsewhere as well. Based on their roots, their food, they form a *kula*. *Vaddas* eat rat meat, *madigas* eat beef, but *madigas*, even till today cut and skin the calf, but *holeyas* eat the meat. Based on these occupations, as you say, but the occupations that the system has imposed are different, we do not accept these...but as communities, not yours or mine, but ours, we live as different *kulas*. (Yashoda, interview DMC office)

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<sup>8</sup> The dictionary translates the term as caste, community, tribe, clan; as well as respectable, noble family, see IBH Kannada-English dictionary)

There are many moves that the DMC makes in articulating caste relations as relations between *kulas*. If we were to analyse this definition of *kulas* in terms of Fraser's analytical categories, it seems that *kulas* are understood by the DMC in terms of *culture*. More substantially, the first move that they make is to distinguish the 'system' from (an idealised) dalit reality. With the notion of *kula-samudaya*, DMC destabilises the 'system' and divests it of legitimacy, by reclaiming practices as one's own. They do this by turning the logic of the 'system' on its head, claiming all of those practices that are identified with dalit communities, (such as food practices and dalit cultural practices which would mark them as 'low') as their own and not imposed by the system. The meanings of *their* practices are then re-inscribed in an understanding of culture-as-difference. Integral to this move of re-visioning of communities as *different* *kulas*, is an understanding that they are not (cannot be) set in a hierarchy:

What the system has given us, we are breaking down actually. We are identifying diverse ways of living. *Holeyas* live differently, so do *vaddas*, so do *madigas* and *gowdas*. Even that the *brahmins* have a different culture, we accept. They live differently, let them live as they desire, but we want to live as we desire as well. (Yashoda, interview, DMC office)

However, understanding identity in terms of difference runs the risk of essentialising identities, the very reason for which the DMC rejected the term 'dalit'. Therefore, a simultaneous move that the DMC makes with understanding *kulas* as different and equal groupings in society, is an evocation of *caste as process*. Yashoda hints at this when she says:

How we look at *kulas* is that in our area, we live a different cultural life...in your area, you are *holeyas* too, but you live a little differently, meaning, you eat the same food, but there is a difference in thinking and customs... (interview, DMC office)

In this understanding, while recognising certain *differences* between communities, DMC attempts to avoid essentialising identities by suggesting that their identities are



not set in stone. Identities are understood as *in process*, constantly being formed and changed. Therefore, the DMC tries to hold onto both the moves of ‘anti-essentialism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ simultaneously<sup>9</sup>.

However, as Fraser suggests, the conjoining of the two debates of anti-essentialism and multiculturalism, ‘results in a one-sided, truncated, “culturalist” problematic’ (Fraser, 1997a: 181). This is evident, as I have suggested, if we unravel DMC’s conception of dalit reality in terms of the analytical categories of culture and economics. It seems that DMC’s understanding of *kulas*, stands on an understanding of dalit *culture*. The clear argument that the DMC makes with the notion of *kula-samudaya*, therefore, is that communities exist as different, but equal *cultural* groups.

The difficulty however, with analysing communities in terms of different, seemingly equal, cultural groupings, is that it runs the risk of not being able to name particular types of injustice, both in terms of *who* has suffered the injustice and in recognising and naming an *injustice*. (This is especially so when there is a constant movement between reality and utopia, as with the DMC). Further, while it seems that the injustice of misrecognition is dealt with by the DMC through a strategy of rejection of the system and the acceptance of particular practices as different, can this be made to stick? Does the DMC differentiate between ‘differences’ they want to affirm and those that they reject?

Further, does it address the question of the injustice of maldistribution? The question is whether the injustice of misrecognition can be remedied at the level of *culture*

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<sup>9</sup> See Fraser’s discussion of the two moves in her article on Multiculturalism, Antiessentialism and Radical Democracy, (1997a: 180-186).



alone, through a process of re-definition, and whether or not redistribution is also needed. Therefore, how is one to understand the specific work that communities do if each *kula* is equal, but different? Where is one to place the analysis of caste communities as based on an ascribed division of labour? What use then is this understanding of difference in terms of political praxis? Yashoda's comment that '*the occupations that the system has imposed, that is different, we do not accept these...*', highlight the tensions in articulating the injustice of maldistribution along with a recognition politics that centres *difference*.

I argue that it is because of this lack, this inability to account for the injustice of maldistribution, that the DMC then veered towards understanding caste relations in terms of the notion of *talasthara*.

### ***Talasthara*: Building Foundations**

Elaborating on the term *talasthara*, Yashoda of the DMC says:

*Talasthara* definitely reflects diversity...I will consider them as labouring classes, because otherwise, it is impossible to survive, because for example, even if a *gowda* has thousands of acres of land, he can't work on the land. What works on it is our labour, we are the ones who have to work on the land. Again, in an upper caste home, it is we who have to do the housework, women from our communities, women from the '*talasthara*', they are the ones who do the work. Even the upper caste intellectuals, no matter what their positions, we are the ones who have to work in their houses...how we look at the term '*talasthara*' is...without us, without the foundation, houses cannot be built...in the same way, we are here as the foundation today, 85% of us. (Yashoda, interview, DMC office)

There is an important shift that the DMC makes with their notion of *talasthara*. They firmly place caste communities in a hierarchy of labouring relations, where the communities from the *talasthara* form the foundations of society. They are the ones that do the *useful work* without which society cannot survive. Though Yashoda starts off with suggesting that *talasthara* reflects diversity, the core of engaging with the

notion of *talasthara* is to establish control by transforming the meanings of communities in the world of labour. Difference, in this regard, reads as *indispensable*: a difference to be respected. *Talasthara* is a term therefore, that differentiates 'necessary labour' from other kinds of work. As such, it is a unifying concept, rather than simply one that *differentiates*. It brings together categories of people belonging to different caste communities and places all of them under the same category, *talasthara*.

To use the analytical categories of culture and economics to unravel the notion of *talasthara*, it is the meanings of the work that communities do that are sought to be transformed. An understanding of a division of labour that creates 'lowly work', is disrupted by an analysis that foregrounds *useful labour*. With the transformations of the meanings of work come an analysis of redistributive strategies:

It is our labour. There is no question of thinking of work as low, or whether or not we should do it. What we want is related to the question of our earnings, how hard we toil. How much they take of our labour, we have to earn as well. They do not labour. We work most, we work the whole day. For example in the garment industry, if we work for ten parts, if we get one part, that is a lot. That too if we agitate, they might give us another part. It is the eight parts that they swallow...it is the fact that they are stealing our labour...it is that concept that we are talking about. (Yashoda, interview, DMC office)

Therefore, from understanding caste relations in terms of equal but different cultural groups, DMC firmly centres economic exploitation in their understanding of *talasthara* communities. What then are the communities that form part of the *talasthara*?

When Yashoda elucidates on what communities make the *talasthara*, '*vaddas, madigas, holeyas, korachas, koramas, nayaks*,....all these communities are from the *talasthara*' (interview, DMC office), the DMC make an interesting move. By



centring the usefulness of the communities, and not any of the other 'caste' categories such as the symbolic violence of untouchability, the DMC frees the associations between the specificity of the work that communities (are meant to) do and the castes to which they belong. However, this does not mean not recognising that it is certain *caste* communities that are disadvantaged in terms of their access to resources and to the means of production. Yashoda clarifies this by distinguishing the BSP notion of *bahujan*<sup>10</sup> (the majority) from *talasthara*:

They [the BSP] include everyone excluding *brahmins*. We can't look at the concept like that. It is because today a *holeya* and a *gowda* are not/cannot be equal. A *baniya* and a *kshatriya*; for a *baniya*, a *kshatriya* is not an equal; today the *baniya* has a lot of property, wealth, business, a *chappal*-making *madiga* cannot keep even a *chappal* shop... (Yashoda, interview, DMC office).

In the DMC's account there is a hierarchy in *caste relations* in terms of the economic injustice of maldistribution. The innovation in the DMC's understanding is that it attempts to transform the ascribed meanings of work, while asking questions of the injustice of maldistribution in terms of an ascriptive hierarchy. However, it is also where DMC probably falters: what do they make of Ambedkar's distinction between division of labour and a division of labourers? Can the ascriptive hierarchy be transformed by transforming the meanings of the work dalit communities do? Further, by centring the labour that dalit communities do, with the notion of *talasthara*, the DMC are unable to account for the injuries of misrecognition of caste communities that are not necessarily linked only to a division of labour. This is where, as I shall show, the DMC has not quite moved away from the understanding of *kula-samudaya* (even though they continue to use the term *talasthara*).

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<sup>10</sup> The BSP is one of only a handful of political parties that seeks specifically to reflect the interests of the 'dalit' communities. But they seek political patronage from the *bahujan*, the common people, the majority, who they define, in terms of exploitation. Therefore, they have a rather broad category of



While they account for mal-distribution with their notion of *talasthara*, and misrecognition with their understanding of *kula-samudaya*, do they attend to the conflicts between understanding caste as process - as different cultural groupings - and an analysis that recognises a hierarchy in economic relations of caste communities? Specifically, do the strategies employed by the DMC allow for a transformation in caste relations, or do they affirm caste relations?

### ***The Recognition-Redistribution Dilemma in DMC politics***

In this part I will analyse the various processes of DMC politics in the context of mapping out their transformative/affirmative strategies. This I argue is related to whether they are able to discern the opposing pulls on transformative strategies, in the context of a bivalent collectivity such as caste. This means dealing with the collectivity by using the categories of culture and economics, following Fraser's use of these as *analytical* categories.

To start with, their rejection of the term 'dalit' is emblematic of a deconstructive strategy. What I mean, is that it is recognition politics and the discomfort with the mis-recognition that the term 'dalit' reinforces, that are the heart of DMC's rejection of the term. Therefore, when they went about the process of re-definition, they were careful about analysing caste relations in terms of *difference*, a difference not to be rejected or changed, but to be respected. This they did by discerning what they thought were *their* practices as opposed to *practices imposed by the system*, i.e. those that they embraced and lived as their own identity, and those into which they had

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analysis and patronage, everyone excluding the *brahmin* community. However, see Omvedt's categorisation of BSP politics in terms of a 'culturalist' polemic (1994b).

been 'thrown'. The aspects of *their* culture were to be celebrated and those of the system were to be rejected as an imposition:

But their culture, their way of life: they impose on us...our culture is forgotten, instead, dances like the bharatnatyam (are imposed)...what we do is not okay, it is dirty. That is okay, it is good, it is good for everyone. That is what I don't like. In terms of our culture, it might be the *tamte* (a particular type of drum), our dances in the villages, or *pada* (songs)...singing amidst people, where there are groups, there itself we sing songs. There are things like that. Others do not have the same things. (Sudha, interview, DMC office)

Therefore, along with a celebration of their culture is a rejection *for themselves*, of a culture that does not belong to them<sup>11</sup>, and which specifically constructs theirs as dirty and low. This also means an excavation of *what their culture is*:

We in the *talasthara* communities, actually we worship the land and nature. We have never worshipped temples as our own. Land is important to us because without land, nobody can exist. That is the reason why we worship land and nature. That is the reason why lots of dalits do not go to the temples. They have rejected it as not theirs. When we question idol worship, who has introduced it, we will get some answers. They have brought it in and have made us accept it as our own. That is when there is a situation where we go to temples. Dalits need not go to the temples...we worshipped our ancestors/respected elders. (Yashoda, interview, DMC office)

There are several issues to raise about DMC's understanding of *kula-samudaya* in specific relation to the politics of difference. Sudha's argument, that the imposition of dominant caste culture as good for *everyone*, resonates in Fraser's understanding of the categories of difference in that there are differences that *should* be valued in everyone. However, Sudha locates her critique in the violence of an imposition of what is proper culture by dominant castes on dalit communities. Both Yashoda and Sudha proffer *another* type of difference, one which is specific to a particular group cultural tradition, that is non-hierarchical and which should be left alone. However, I

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<sup>11</sup> The question of whether or not 'bharatnatyam is dominant caste culture' has been debated. Bina Agarwal argues that *bharatnatyam* was a dance that originated from *devadasis* and was later appropriated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when *devadasis* themselves were stigmatised as prostitutes and barred from performing. Girish Karnad stresses this aspect of appropriation and suggests that there is a need for women and dalits to re-claim it (Omvedt, 1994: 102). This is similar to the appropriation of the *lavani* in Maharashtra (Rege, 1996). However, these arguments always leave behind incredibly messy issues around the 'ownership' of culture.



also argue that while these strands of difference exist in DMC's conception of dalit culture, the pull towards understanding *differences* between communities, coming as it does from resisting a misrecognition of their culture as low, means that the DMC sometimes slips into the creation of a mythic 'authentic' dalit culture. Therefore, they valorise conceptions of a dalit culture while constructing dominant caste culture as regressive, oppressive and static. This is especially clear when it comes to questions of an 'egalitarian dalit community's' conception of gender (I shall discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 5, Part 2). In effect, in their attempt to cull their 'real' culture from the 'system' which has subverted it, they valorise 'their' cultural practices, while reifying the practices of dominant caste communities as well. Therefore, the initial purpose with which DMC set off envisaging a re-definition, falls on barren ground. An example of this occurred in a recent newspaper interview with members of the DMC:

Shiva: Dalits are an advanced race. Women are equal to men, if not more powerful.

Aida: Dalit women have equal or more say in decision making, they labour outside and work at home. Our women even drink and smoke with their husbands. Sexual relationships are very open. In case their husbands have other women in their lives, they accept and deal with the situation. Similarly the husbands also accept and deal with their wives' extra-marital affairs. Feminist theories related to the outside communities don't even apply to us. (Govindarajan, *Deccan Herald*, August 21, 2003)

This romanticism of dalit women's lives underlines the dangers of DMC's conception of egalitarian dalit communities. With the DMC, therefore, there is a movement between naming injustice in the context of a cultural misrecognition and a refusal to do so because of the misrecognition that they perceive it reinforces. This becomes especially difficult when it comes to articulating a dalit feminist politics, as I shall show in Chapter 5. Moreover, it is also difficult to articulate the injustice suffered by particular dalit communities.



When it comes to an analysis of economics, I want to draw attention to the fact that, while it is important to transform the meanings of work that caste communities do, because maldistribution is essentially an injustice flowing from the economic ordering of society, the relations of economic inequities will change only when the relations that produce them no longer exist. Therefore, it is exploitative caste relations themselves that have to be transformed, not just the meanings of the work that communities do. While valorising the work of communities in terms of indispensability may mean that it is possible to argue for better wages and a share in the profits, with the analysis of *useful work*, it is difficult to dissociate particular types of work from particular communities. As Gandhi's analysis of ascriptive calling has demonstrated, an analysis of *talasthara* communities as being engaged in useful work does not necessarily allow for a disassociation of particular communities with certain kinds of work. That is why Rani's observation that the '*talasthara*' refers to 'all those communities that accept labour and exist' (interview, DMC office), stands on the brink of two readings: a recognition of labouring communities as *better*, and a naming of an injustice of maldistribution.

### ***The Possibility of a Gendered Reading of Self-definition?***

The question of a gendered reading of self-definition is one that has to be read against the grain of the politics of the DMC. This is in spite of the fact that gender is within the explicit parameters of their politics. It is because of their investments in a politics of difference that the gender question has legitimacy and is at least theoretically within the ambit of its politics. Having said that, it is also the reason why certain ways of understanding *kula-samudaya* are the most problematic for a gendered feminist politics. I will examine this more clearly in Chapter 5. I consider

that an understanding of *kulas* as a *different* cultural groups *can be* extremely problematic for a dalit feminist politics, especially when it centres the valorisation of dalit community identity and distances ‘faulty’ practices within the communities, as part of the system and not part of dalit identity. This is because it allows for the construction of an egalitarian dalit identity which sometimes rests on a construction of dalit women as more liberated, as against repressed dominant caste women. This conception of dalit communities as ideal, means that it becomes very difficult to name injuries of misrecognition and maldistribution for dalit women.

DMC uses the notion of *talasthara* to centre *useful* work which means that the work that women do, at home and in public spaces, can be conceived in these terms. Therefore it opens up the possibility, which some women at the DMC have begun to address, to talk about work in gendered terms. However, a gendered analysis of work has to contend with the opposing tendencies of recognising the work that dalit women do, while naming it as an injustice of maldistribution, to be transformed. By this I mean the transformation of the ‘permanent’ association of dalit women with particular types of work. Further, when theorising about the *foundation* of society, dalit women will have to be the *subjects* of the discussion, in the sense of articulating exactly what work they do in caste terms as well as in gendered terms. If the DMC is wary about how they construct *kula-samudaya*, I suggest that the DMC has a conceptual ethos of realising a gendered analysis of caste relations, because they are not necessarily in search of a holy grail of ‘dalit-hood’, and are therefore less susceptible to seeing gender as second to the iconic dalit community.



## **MRHS : *dalit* and *madiga***

The Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS), is a group that has evolved out of the political context of Andhra Pradesh, the state neighbouring Karnataka. Under the banner of the Madiga Dandora, it has been growing in Karnataka over the last several years, culminating in the formation of the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi in Karnataka around 1999/2000. In Karnataka, the leaders of the group suggest that it has a very specific agenda: to agitate for reservations for the *madiga* community. Their mandate is focused on procuring proportional reservation (based on their population amongst the scheduled caste communities) in jobs and education for the *madiga* community. Given the recent history of dalit struggles in the state (which is quite different from those of its neighbouring Andhra Pradesh) the investments in the term dalit and *madiga* are quite different in Karnataka.

In 2000 in Andhra Pradesh, after a long and sustained struggle by the Madiga Reservation Poratta Samithi (MRPS), the *madiga* community procured differential reservation within the scheduled caste community (The Hindu, November, 9, 2000; Ramakrishna, 1998). The scheduled caste community has thereby been divided into A, B, C and D categories depending on the population of the various groups. This has spurred the struggle in Karnataka, where there have been increased demands for separate reservations (The Hindu, March 15, 2002; Deccan Herald, Bangalore, March 14, 2003; Deccan Herald, August 6, 2003). In Andhra however, this ‘proportional’ reservation was not well received by the Mala Mahasabha, the



organisation of the other 'untouchable' community in Andhra, the *malas* (The Hindu, November 9, 2000; Ramakrishna, 1998).<sup>12</sup>

In Karnataka, however, the history of dalit struggles has been quite different. The DSS sought to actively unite *holeya* and *madiga* identities (see Chapter 3). Moreover, in 2002, the DSS offered their support to the *madiga* cause, claiming that it was a just struggle (interview, Parthasarathy, MRHS). As Partha suggests, the MRHS would not have formed in Karnataka if the DSS had not delayed in lending their support to the cause of the *madiga* people. Therefore, the politics of associating and disassociating with the term 'dalit' is very difficult for members of the MRHS because not all of them are opposed to the politics of the DSS.

Therefore, while it may seem that by agitating for specific community rights, the MRHS is also engaging with a particular schematic of caste relations, in which the hierarchies run right through the dalit communities, the interesting dimension to their politics is that they refuse, unlike the DMC, to easily distance themselves from the dalit identity. In this section, I will look at the investments made in the term *madiga* by the members of the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS), as well as their continued association with being '*dalit*'.

I want to highlight that the MRHS discourse on *dalit* and *madiga*, with its particular brand of politics, questions the mainstream understandings of caste hierarchy even as

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<sup>12</sup> The histories of the dalit struggles in both the states, while different, have influenced each other. The Andhra dalit movement has had close connections with the radical left Naxalite movement. The Dalit Mahasabha was formed in 1985 in the state. There are several other organisations such as the Mala Mahanadu and the MRPS that espouse a particular community identity. In Karnataka, on the other hand, the history of the DSS attests to attempts at unifying the 'lower' caste communities under the term 'dalit'.

in Karnataka it has the peculiar position of decrying divisions amongst *dalit* communities. What then gives the category of *dalit* coherence in their discourses?

In this part, I will investigate where one is to place MRHS politics in a matrix of recognition and redistribution. To start with, are they struggling for the recognition of *madiga* identity? What does it mean to recognise a particular identity for a specific re-distributive strategy? How is one to understand the simultaneous dissonance and investment with the term 'dalit' for members of the MRHS? While locating dalit identity in the context of the history of dalit politics in Karnataka helps to understand the investments in the term dalit, as well as the limited strategy of the MRHS, does it also indicate the political use the term has in the context of the city? What about the specific injustices of misrecognition that *madiga* communities endure, as against those endured by other dalit communities? Does the MRHS address these concerns by limiting their strategy to one of an affirmative redistribution? Before I analyse the politics of the MRHS, I would like to situate the political affiliations of the members of the MRHS that I spoke with. I suggest that these affiliations mean that they have a particular stake in dalit politics.

Keshavmurthy is the General Secretary of the Guttuge Pourakarmika Sangha, as well as a founder-member of the MRHS. As the secretary of the *sangha*, he is involved in agitating for a change in the economic conditions of the contract street cleaners, who are mostly *madiga* women. His politics in this context is firmly situated in the economic, social and political conditions of Bangalore city. On the other hand, as a founder-member of the MRHS, he has a much wider mandate. Ganganna is a member of the MRHS and a founder-member of the Dalit Kranti Dal (Dalit



Revolution Group - DKD). The DKD was started in the Peenya industrial estate, formed with the specific purpose of organising dalit workers. The issues that they addressed revolved around access to water in the slums, discrimination faced by dalit people in his locality and access to *hakku patras* (paper establishing rights over property in the slums) etc. Therefore, the stakes that Ganganna has in a dalit understanding that unifies questions of caste/class, are particular to the context of the work that dalit people do in the city, as well as the context of slum politics. The other two members of the MRHS, Parthasarathy and Chandra, like everyone else, have had a history of involvement in dalit politics in Karnataka. All of them are interested in the broader context of dalit politics in the state, as well the context of the dalit politics in the city.

### ***Dalit: The Holy Ground?***

To start with, the members of the MRHS make radically different investments in the term 'dalit' from the DMC. At face value one would imagine, that as a group that identifies a specific community amongst the wider dalit community, it would have a strong sense of dissonance with the term 'dalit'. While I shall show that this is true of some of its members, there is also a sense of an *investment* in the term for all the members of the MRHS that I met. Keshavmurthy of the *pourakarmika* movement (the contract street cleaners), who is also a member of the MRHS explains:

How I understand the term 'dalit' is...importantly, it is a word that co-ordinates the unity of the oppressed, of all the working class and exploited class and caste in this society. (interview, Samvada office)

Keshavmurthy's understanding of dalit communities echoes the DSS analysis of the co-relation between caste and class down the pyramid of caste relations. Caste and class relations are not necessarily in conflict. There is a need for solidarity between



the two, and this solidarity exists because down the caste pyramid, the two are indistinguishable. Quite unlike the clinical DMC take on 'dalit', when he expands on his understanding of the term, Keshavmurthy tells a different story:

How I understand it is...dal-it. 'Dal' means crop. The ones who discovered crop in the beginning. Farmers...workers, historically, they were the ones who grew the crop. They are the dalits. The ones who come from this root are dalits, especially (in terms of) origins. All of them are *sudras*. Why we want to, desire to give the term 'dalit', an expansive meaning, is because for this working class to liberate, they have to come under the term. That is very important. And why we accept the term '*dalit*' is because...with all the contradictions in India...caste contradictions, cultural, religious, class...amidst all this, there is a need for an ideal of unity, among the working class always. Among the Scheduled Castes, there are a lot of castes, sub-castes, sub cultures. Amidst all this, there must be the unity of integration, an ideal of unity. That is why everyone accepts the term '*dalit*', and so do we. (interview, Samvada office)

To analyse Keshavmurthy's conception of the term 'dalit', I will take the three categories that he uses: working class, Scheduled Caste and *sudra*, to see how he understands caste relations. In this context, (leaving aside the politics of naming identities as dalit) Keshavmurthy's analysis of the term *dalit* in the first instance, seems no different from DMC's understanding of *talasthara*. Dalits are communities that have historically been productive communities. Therefore, they both start with the working classes, the foundation of society, useful communities. This is also what holds his understanding of the concept of *sudra* within his definition of working communities. By invoking the schematic of the four-fold hierarchy of the *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaisya* and the *sudra*, he continues to centre the *labour* that differentiates caste communities. It is the *sudras* that are understood to be the working communities. However, talking about working communities as *sudras*, also means that Keshavmurthy evokes a particular understanding of an ascribed division of labour. This is where his understanding of working caste communities begins to diverge from that of DMC's.

When he invokes the term scheduled castes, Keshavmurthy hints at the cultural differentiation of caste communities. By positing that the term 'dalit' is useful for the consolidation of the ethic of unity and solidarity amongst various 'lower' caste communities, it could be read that Keshavmurthy's ethic of unity goes hand in hand with a deconstructive analysis, where cultural differences may be celebrated and affirmed without being essentialised. However, cultural aspects of caste communities are not the focus of Keshavmurthy's conception of the term 'dalit'. In comparison with Keshavmurthy, the DMC have a far more specific engagement with the cultural aspects of dalit identity. Despite these differences, both DMC's conception of *talasthara* and Keshavmurthy's analysis of *dalit* unify working caste communities.

To reiterate, Keshavmurthy collapses the use of several terms: scheduled caste, *sudra* and working class into the term 'dalit'. Notably, he does not start with the *panchama*, the fifth caste, the 'untouchable' castes, which are the starting point for much of mainstream dalit politics. Although he talks about caste contradictions, religious contradictions, etc, I suggest that there is an economic bias in Keshavmurthy's analysis. In this framework, it seems, all 'economically oppressed people' are dalits.

This move can be read in several ways. It can be read in terms of the investments in redistributive politics that the MRHS is engaged in - redistribution of access to jobs and education<sup>13</sup>, and it can be read as a result of Keshavmurthy's own work with the contract street cleaners, agitating for economic redistribution (see next chapter). While his particular understanding of the term 'dalit' could be read as a move made

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<sup>13</sup> The MRPS in Andhra, however, is making far more redistributive demands, including questions of land distribution.



possible by the political climate of the city and by living in the city<sup>14</sup>, I would argue that because dalit politics is yet to formulate a sociology of caste relations in the city, there continues to be tension around the relationship between caste and class in the context of the economy of the city. However, it is still important for Keshavmurthy to hold onto a *caste based* definition of dalit, which is why he reiterates that, 'in every caste, there is class, in every class, there is caste' (interview, Samvada office). While this may point to the differences in understanding of the structures of caste and class, in terms of the categories of culture and economics, I will suggest that it seems that the term *dalit* is useful because of the possibilities it offers for unifying caste and class in the city. However, there is a paradox in accounting for the misrecognition and maldistribution of particular dalit communities, while opening the space to include 'other' poor communities under the rubric of the term dalit. This seems particularly sharpened in the context of the city.

The investments in the term 'dalit', as well as the need to articulate caste and class relations together, are once again reflected in Ganganna's response to the utility of the term: 'It is because, as Ambedkar says, poor people of all jatis are dalits and there should be unity amongst the poor' (Ganganna, interview). Yet when probed further, on who he refers to when he uses the term dalit, he says, 'mostly *madigas* and *holeyas*', thereby using 'untouchability' as a marker for defining dalit people. However, there is an intricate system of distinction and association that Ganganna uses when he talks about the dalit community, 'the untouchables, they are dalits as well. But the 'untouchables', they are a particular set of people, the *madigas*,

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<sup>14</sup> This is reflected by the fact that many NGOs in Bangalore would use the term 'dalit' to mean, 'oppressed people', whether in terms of caste or class. Developmental Initiatives for Social Change (DISC) is one such organisation.



*holeyas, dokkalarus*<sup>15</sup>...'(Ganganna, interview). In this, Ganganna sees the term *dalit* for its usefulness. It is a term of unity, and as Keshavmurthy suggests, it co-ordinates *oppressed* communities. It is this double move, which is a hallmark of DSS politics, of suggesting that the 'untouchable' communities are a non-negotiable boundary, while also opening up the possibilities for other 'poor' people to come within its umbrella, that continues to inform the investment in the term 'dalit'.

Ganganna however, also specifies the basis of this unification, especially in the context of the city. Talking about why it is difficult to distinguish between the poor and 'lower caste' communities, he says:

In all, (it is) a dalit struggle. Now in the slums in the city, there are people of all jatis who are poor, but we cannot look at it like that (in terms of caste alone). We cannot at all look at it like that. In all, we have to think about all dalit people, we have to think about the poor of all jatis. In the city. In the villages, it obtains differently. In the city, the people living in the slums, them and us, are the same. (interview, Samvada office)

However, the purpose of the MRHS, as I shall show, undermines this investment in the term 'dalit'.

Chandra, a more forthcoming member of the MRHS, talks about the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi and the deep betrayal that the *madiga* community have suffered:

B Krishnappa used to tell me ages ago, "be careful that the organisation that you have built should not turn against you, be careful *anna*". I feel that that has become true. The term 'dalit' has cheated us in the most terrifying fashion. Actually, I am from an untouchable community. The *holeyas* and *madigas* are the main ones here. We, *bovis*, *lambanis*, *madigas*, *holeyas*, all of us had taken on the term dalit together, for unification. This unifying term,...within that we are the *madiga* jati...actually we are ones who had gone in with expansive hearts, to unify our communities from within. We were heading in one direction seeking this expansion. They who had used the term along with us, they balanced this expansion along with organising their own

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<sup>15</sup> The *dokkala* community is one that does not figure prominently in much of mainstream dalit politics. They are a community that is understood to be nomadic and which traditionally seeks patronage from the *madiga* community. They are said to live beside and work for the *madiga* communities in each village as they move from place to place. This group is indicative of the disruptions of a neat hierarchy with the *dalit* community at the bottom.

communities. Now, these communities are ahead of us by a hundred years. We, who came along holding onto the term dalit ended up having to use it only in public; inside, they differentiated against us. They developed their own communities. They made political alliances with parties. We did not do that. When we use the term dalit, even today, it seems to refer mostly to our comrade jati, the *holeyas*. Nobody seems to consider the most backward *madiga* community. So, when we use all these terms, dalit and others, our jati has been forgotten. (interview, Samvada office)

In this account, Chandra identifies both the injustice of maldistribution and misrecognition inflicted against the *madiga* community. While he situates the injustice of mal-distribution in his use of the term 'backward', he also locates the injury of mis-recognition when he speaks of the symbolic violence perpetrated against the *madiga* community. Unlike Keshavmurthy's and Ganganna's investment in dalit *unity*, this unity according to Chandra, has been a terrifying one for the *madiga* community. The dalit brotherhood is meaningless, because it evinces the silencing of the *madiga* community. There is, therefore, an unresolved struggle within the MRHS around their allegiance to a dalit brotherhood. Does the dalit community offer solidarity and support, or is it a smoke screen that does not illuminate the injustice within communities? What is at stake that there are such tensions in discerning where the MRHS stands in relation to other dalit groups? When Ganganna says, '*dalit* and *madiga*, it is all the same thing. 'Dalit' is inside/part of the MRHS. It is not that we are against anyone', what are the reasons that he offers? I suggest that by examining the mandate of the MRHS, we may be able to see where we can locate the coherence and disruption of the dalit identity for *madiga* people.

### ***MRHS Politics and the Mandate of Reservations***

Parthasarathy of the MRHS explains the reasons for the formation of the group:

In the last 54 years, within reservation, layers have begun to form. The reasons for which reservations were given, started appearing within the reservations itself. There



are 101 castes in scheduled castes. So the major larger groups...are the *mala* and the *madiga*. In Karnataka, (that would be) the *madiga* and the *holeya*...within this there is an injustice done towards the madiga people. Presently, if there are 75 teaching posts in Bangalore, only 9 are *madiga*. In Hampi university, if there are 11 teaching posts reserved for *madiga* people, not one is *madiga*. (interview, Samvada office)

Partha very clearly reads the discrepancies in the proportion of the reservations taken by *madiga* people, as reflective of the injustice that *madiga* people face. However, when Ganganna of the MRHS and DKD elaborates on the purpose of the MRHS, there is a sense of dissipation of this injustice because Ganganna is not keen on creating divisions between *dalit* communities. In the name of dalit political unity, he sweeps aside differences in the specificity of the *injustices* suffered by different dalit groups:

It is about the reservation due to us. *Madigas* are *dalits*. Amongst *dalits*, there are *madigas*, *vaddas*, *lambanis*, *nayaks*, a 101 jatis in all. Why the *madigas* are struggling is because there are 85% *madigas*; the other 15% , others could be *holeyas*, *vaddas*, *lambanis*....now amongst say, the 15% reservation, if we are given 7%, that is how much we should get; if we get 7%, then it will be enough for our community, similarly with the *holeya* community, everyone will get reservation. The main point is that out of the 18% reservation that is given by the government, 3% goes to the ST (Scheduled Tribe) community, the remaining 15% is not being given properly, to any caste, it could be anyone, *holeyas*, *madigas*, nobody is getting it properly. It is not about putting down the other castes, our *holeya* community because depending on the % of the population, somebody has to get 7%, someone else 6% and still someone else 1%. If they give the reservation based on the *jati*, then we will get 7%. It is based on the population of the *jati*. (Ganganna, interview, Samvada office)

Ganganna's (and Partha's) understanding of the MRHS mandate can be read as suggesting that the *madiga* community suffers from the injury of mal-distribution of state resources. Therefore, they argue that the *madiga* community is more populous and deserves reservation proportional to its numbers. The underlying sentiment of MRHS politics, however, is that the *madiga* community is a distinct community, with specific injustices committed against them, which will be remedied by proportional representation for its members. It will not do, that *other dalit* communities benefit from reservations, when *madiga* communities suffer injuries as



a specific community. However, in terms of the mandate (it is a one-point agenda as Partha said) of the MRHS, in the specific context of Karnataka, it seems that the injuries suffered by *madiga* communities remain as sub-text, in spite of Chandra's sense of betrayal.

I have suggested that it is the context of dalit politics in Karnataka that allows for some members of the MRHS to continue to hold onto an (uneasy) allegiance with both *dalit* as well as *madiga* identities. Since the consolidation of *holeya* and *madiga* identities, and caste and class identities, serve a very useful political purpose of solidarity, to give that up is to forsake a source of strength. There is too much at stake in the dalit identity to give it up that easily. That is the reason why Ganganna insists that the MRHS struggle is *only* about reservation:

Even if it is difficult, we will have to get together. Because then our strength/power will be different. To stand up against us will be difficult, because if we split/get splintered, the 'parties' who are before us, against us, what they will do is they will target us separately, at different times, once the *madigas*, another time the *holeyas*, and then the *bovis*. In this way, they will target each one, if they target the *holeyas*, the *madigas* won't come forward, and then to destroy the *madigas* will be easy. Similarly, the other way. They will use the divisiveness in this way, the system. Keeping all this in mind, what we are doing is... that should not happen. We should all be together. It is only for reservations that we are struggling, not for divisions, we do not have feelings like that, we are not ready to do that. (Ganganna, interview, Samvada office)

By centring the redistributive strategy of affirmative action for *madiga* communities, the MRHS attempts to address the state, and not necessarily any of the other dalit communities. Therefore they argue, if the state acts as it should, there is no reason for the continued existence of the MRHS, because all they want is for the state to carry out its duty of treating its citizens equally (also interview with Parthasarathy). The injuries of maldistribution and misrecognition are not a problem then *between* dalit communities. By shifting the focus onto the duties of the state, the MRHS hopes

to diminish the sense of disruption between dalit communities. Once this is resolved, they can get back to working together again:

The fact that the government cheats us in the scheme of reservations...that they give us a meagre 15% and make us scramble for it, that they makes us fight amongst ourselves, we do not want that. If we get reservations based on our populations, we will not have to fight amongst each other. So, we have to get together and struggle, all of us, *madigas*, *holeyas*, *bovis*. Then the 15% will be distributed correctly. Otherwise, the government will keep cheating us. 'We are giving you 15%, you are not taking it, they are, and so are they..'. so, it is confined to this aspect. Apart from this, we are all one. The intention of the MRHS is this. Once we get our quota of reservation based on our population, we will all have to get together, we don't need to fight amongst ourselves, all of us dalits will have to organise and work together. (Ganganna, interview, Samvada office)

While Ganganna is keen to emphasise the limited mandate of the MRHS, he also points out the reasons for the coherence of the category 'dalit'. The state's redistributive policies are divisive. The state makes all dalit communities scramble for limited resources. Therefore, the state is a source of the injustice between the communities.

The MRHS holds onto two conflicting moves. On the one hand, they suggest that the term dalit offers the umbrella of solidarity that is much needed amongst lower caste/class communities. On the other hand, the *madiga* community is a distinct community that requires proportional reservation. If the injustice is understood in terms of a mal-distribution of resources against *madiga* communities by the state, and this can be addressed by agitating for proportional reservation, then there is no need to disturb the unity that the term 'dalit' offers. However, if the injustice is understood in terms of a cultural valuational differentiation and an injury of maldistribution within dalit communities, then the term dalit as a unifying category is meaningless. The differing investments within the MRHS on what term to hold dear, depends also on the purposes they see in disrupting the unity. While there are



members of the MRHS (such as Chandra), that are willing to name injustices for a specific *madiga* politics, there are others, such as Ganganna and Keshavmurthy, for whom the term *dalit* is too valuable to discard for a sectarian identity politics. This does not mean, however, that they do not recognise the specificity of *madiga* experience ( I will examine this in the next chapter). Keshavmurthy suggests that the mandate of the MRHS is completely inadequate because the MRHS has a far more incisive critique of caste relations to offer:

The *madiga* struggle is not struggling in ways that it should be. Just for reservation... since the middle class among the *madigas* are the ones that the reservation politics applies to, the struggle is lagging behind. It needs to get deep-rooted. Meaning, education rate has to improve, lots of cultural reforms have to be brought about, be it alcoholism...lots of historical and socio-economic studies have to be carried out in all sectors. Cultural reforms meaning, 'from monkey to person'. Nobody has become a person yet. To become a person is difficult. He is still in the process. He is still not a person. (Keshavmurthy, interview, Samvada office)

### **Madiga women?**

MRHS politics, in the context of its extremely narrow mandate of procuring proportional reservation for madiga people, is at the present moment, in Bangalore, not concerned with centring gender. Even though some of its members, such as Keshavmurthy, are part of groups such as the pourakarmika movement (city workers' movement), which has a high composition of *madiga* women, when it comes to the specific politics of the MRHS, the question of a proportional reservation for *madiga* women is not a part of its agenda.

Similarly, although Ganganna liaises with several local dalit women's groups, in which there are discussions and strategies evolved to combat gender injustice, this does not seem to have translated into the framework of the agenda of *madiga* politics. Parthasarathy of the MRHS suggested that, while there were many women who were part of the cadres of the MRHS, there were no women in the leadership of

the MRHS. Explaining the difficulty with having women at the leadership level, he says:

It has only been 1-2 years since it (MRHS) started. It is struggling to survive at that. Practically, it is not possible (for women to be in leadership). People who talk, talk. But, the people who suffer the injustice know. For a *madiga*, to come out as a *madiga* is difficult, an issue. *Madiga*. A man. In this context, to expect women to come forward would be wrong. However, to make the efforts that they too will come forward is right. Now, those kind of efforts are on. (interview, Samvada office)

Partha argues that the difficulty in having dalit women in positions of leadership is because of condition of the *madiga* community as a whole. However, the fact that the MRHS has not centred *madiga* women in their particular redistributive politics, seems to indicate that the space for *madiga* women to articulate a specifically *madiga* feminist politics is still to emerge. While there are struggles within the city, that are predominantly composed of *madiga* women, in relation to contract street cleaners, as well as in relation to domestic work, the connections between *madiga* politics and gender are not yet made in the dalit political space of Karnataka and Bangalore. However, I would argue that given the potential within the MRHS for identifying injuries of maldistribution and misrecognition amongst a particular dalit community, it has the conceptual space for *madiga* women to make similar claims.

## **KDWM: Domestic Workers, Slum Residents, SC and Christian Women**

The Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement is an organisation that specifically seeks to organise domestic workers in Karnataka. It is part of the larger National Domestic Worker's Movement, that was started in Bombay in 1985. The group is engaged in organising domestic workers in the slums of Bangalore, as well as elsewhere in places such as Mandya and Mysore (interview with Sr. Celia, KDWM).



The specific agenda of the Domestic Workers Movement is to agitate for a change in working conditions of the domestic workers.

Most of the women domestic workers that I met in the KDWM office, and in their homes in the slums of Karianapalya and Doddkunte, were *madiga* or dalit Christian women. The ways in which the women at KDWM engaged with the naming of their identities were very different from the DMC and the MRHS. There are several reasons for this. First, because the KDWM was a group engaged in working with *domestic workers*, their identities as poor women, working women, women living in the slums of Bangalore, took precedence to their identities as *madiga* women. This is because the KDWM *as a body*, did not make the connections between their identities as *madiga* women and the work that the women did. While I shall bring out the ways in which the women themselves do make connections between the work that they do and the communities to which they belong in Chapter 5, Part 2, in this section I shall locate the tensions in accounting for the several identities of the women.

Since the KDWM as a body did not make explicit connections with the work that women did and the communities to which they belonged, the women domestic workers did not have access to the political and politicised categories of ‘dalit’<sup>16</sup> and ‘talasthara’. In fact, all of the women that I met at the KDWM office and in the slums of Doddkunte and Karianapalya, said that they had not even heard of the term ‘dalit’ (focus group discussions on caste in KDWM office and Doddkunte slum).

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<sup>16</sup> This is in spite of the DSS and other groups such as the Samata Sainik Dal (SSD) being active in some slums (see Janasahayog and CIVIC, 2003). In Doddkunte, for instance, the DSS offered services such as legal proceedings against eviction for people living in the slums. Even so, the women did not categorise themselves as dalit.

Further, the women that I met at the KDWM had a complex relationship with their identities as *madiga*. Unlike the members of the MRHS, there was no sense of defiant pride about identifying themselves as belonging to the *madiga* community, especially in my early meetings with the women. This was because the process of naming identities in terms of *caste* was not a process with which the women felt comfortable. When initially asked about what communities they belonged to, most of the women, especially from the *madiga* group, would say that they were ‘SC’ (Scheduled Caste). On the other hand, the group of *dalit Christian* women identified themselves as Christians in the first instance (focus group discussions on caste in the KDWM office and in Doddkunte).

The adoption of legalese and a different religion are striking and pervasive forms used by the women to identify themselves. In the first instance, the *madiga* women use a legal term, ‘Scheduled Caste’, an identity that ‘entitles them to benefits from the state’. In the second instance, the *dalit Christian* women use a term that distances them from the caste *Hindu* hierarchy.

Even after several interactions with the women, the question of *asking* which specific community amongst the Schedules Castes they belonged to was a difficult one. When the women reflected on the processes of naming (in a later situation), with regard to their workplace and whether anyone identified them as *madiga*, their response reflected their discomfort with being associated with the term *madiga*:

Narsamma: No one asks us anything of that sort. No one asks us which caste, jati we are from. We don’t ask either.

Lakshamma: But there are a few people in this area, you know this shop down the road, from there on, people say, “these are madigas, Scheduled Caste, SC - something or the other”.

Eshwamma: The type of people who ask, ask. (interview, Karianapalya slum)



The women indicate that the process of identification as *madiga* or Scheduled Caste was not one of *self*-identification, rather it was an external one, loaded with negative and symbolically violent meanings. The symbolic violence of being associated with the terms *madiga* and Scheduled Caste was overwhelming in the discussions with the women. While the women also question the specific meanings associated with being *madiga* (see Chapter 5), for them, the politics of naming were clearly exercises in power. It was a process in which they were put in their place, and with which they were completely uncomfortable. The women at KDWM therefore locate caste relations in terms of a hierarchy. 'Caste' did not have any positive connotations and people who talked of identity in terms of caste were clearly of a certain 'type'.

I would like to distinguish this analysis of caste relations from the embarrassment of speaking about caste amongst secular and left liberals (see Chapter 1). When the women at KDWM seek to dissociate themselves from identification in terms of caste, they are also engaging with the symbolic violence of the caste hierarchy. On the other hand, secular and left liberals, in their disavowal of caste, leave caste relations *un-interrogated*.

The symbolic violence of being associated with dalit is also the reason why many of the dalit Christian women would divulge their castes only after I gained the trust of the women. Ganganna offers us an insight into dalit Christian identity in the context of the city:

In the local areas,... I live in Bangalore, in my area, everyone knows that I am *madiga*. If I convert, what people will do is that they won't look at me like that. If I say I am interested in converting to Christianity, the people, they will not look at me as a Christian, they will look at me only as a *madiga*. But, if I leave this place and go elsewhere then they might accept me as one. For example, the people who have come from Tamil Nadu, all those who have converted to Christianity, most of them are dalits, all of them. The ones who have come from there, what we do here is, 'yes, they are

Christians'. But in Tamil Nadu, in their home-towns, nobody calls them Christians, they are called *Chakliyas*, or *Pariyas*, *Arundathis*. (interview, Samvada office)

While Ganganna indicates the ways in which mobility and conversion allow for a different bases of identification, he also indicates the limitations in the space for *performance*. In the local area in Bangalore in which he lives, everyone knows he is *madiga*. If he moved and converted, maybe people would accept him. However the underlying understanding that Ganganna offers is that everyone knows that someone who is Christian is *actually* dalit.

The most prominent way in which both the dalit Christian and *madiga* women identified themselves was in terms of poverty. Poverty was a recurring theme in many women's analysis of their life-situations. They defined themselves in terms of being poor and lacking access to resources such as education, proper housing, food, clothing for their children and health facilities. I examine the maldistribution amongst dalit communities as a structuring attribute of their identities in Chapter 5, Part 2. Apart from poverty, the women also identified untouchability, based directly on food practices and the work that they do, as a source of their discrimination. I examine the injustice of untouchability, in specific relation to the women in Chapter 5. Further, as I have suggested earlier, since it organises around domestic work, the KDWM as a body located the identity of the women as domestic workers as most significant. In the next chapter (Part 2), I shall examine the tensions in accounting for the injustice of performing domestic work between the KDWM as a body (with an agenda of agitating for better wages) and the women themselves who connected the work that they did to the communities that they belonged to. I shall argue that since the KDWM does not interrogate the meanings of domestic work with the



communities that the women belong to, it sets up an unresolved tension between the various identities of the women.

For the moment, we can read some of the processes of *self*-identification that the women domestic workers are engaged in as exercises in demanding political parity in *re-distributive* terms. Scheduled Caste, domestic workers, women living in the slums – in each of these instances, they are claiming their rights as citizens of the state. With the term ‘Scheduled Caste’, they claim the rights of caste certificates and reservations; as domestic workers, a regulation of employment and working conditions; as women living in slums, *hakku patras* - rights of housing in the slums. This is shown by the fact that in many of my interactions with the women, since they knew that I had ‘lawyer’ connections, they would ask about how they could procure caste certificates, possession certificates and so on.

The initial discomfort amongst the women in talking about caste identity is indicative of the extent of the symbolic violence that the women experience. Therefore, when it comes to locating symbolic violence, it seems that their caste identities take predominance. Being from the *madiga* community seems to offer no *value* for the women, either in redistributive or recognition terms. I shall locate the injustice that the women workers identify, as women, as *madiga*, as domestic workers and as poor communities living in the slums, as well as the strategies they adopt in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the politics of naming in three disparate groups working amongst dalit communities in Bangalore. The DMC is a group of young dalit activists, some of whom are women, who work in the outskirts of Bangalore, as well as in the urban context. In the processes of their engagement with the term 'dalit', they have come to reject the term altogether. They argue that the term 'dalit', with its meanings of 'broken', 'downtrodden' and 'oppressed' is itself an oppressive category of identification. The DMC, in following a trajectory with their investment in a politics that foregrounds agency, engaged with 'kula-samudaya' as a process of self-identification that allowed for the conception of caste-communities as equal, but different cultural groups. However, such an understanding did not allow for an analysis of the injustice of maldistribution in dalit communities. Therefore, the DMC moved onto a self-definition of identity in terms of *talasthara*, indicating their indispensable status in the context of economic relations. While the DMC continues to hold onto an understanding of caste relations in terms of *kula-samudaya*, there are underlying tensions in the conceptions of difference that such an understanding entails. The tensions lie in the reification of an utopian dalit community which forecloses any feminist analysis of dalit relations.

The MRHS hold onto two conflicting moves. They continue to have (a differing) investment in the term dalit, even as they argue for a redistributive strategy for a particular dalit community. However, they provide the basis for a critique of dalit identity, both in terms of the injustice of misrecognition as well as maldistribution. Further, the MRHS has not incorporated a gendered analysis in their redistributive politics. While there are women in the cadres of the MRHS, they have no women in



the leadership of the group. The MRHS nevertheless allows for the possibility of a feminist critique of dalit relationships, because of the ways in which they locate the injustice against a particular dalit community.

The KDWM is completely different from the other two groups in that it does not have access to the politicised discourses of either the term 'dalit' or 'talasthara'. While it is an all-women group, Sr. Celia, who is not a domestic worker, mobilises the group. Amongst the domestic workers themselves, there is no immediate defiant pride in their *madiga* identity because of the symbolic violence associated with an external identification with the terms *madiga* and Scheduled Caste. Further, since the KDWM is a group that is engaged in the organisation of domestic workers, the identities of the women as poor, as slum residents, as workers, are the ones that the *group* engages with. The discourse of the *group* does not easily allow for making the connections with their work, the places that they live, the conditions in which they live and their caste identity. Therefore, the KDWM seems to give predominance to an analysis of gender and class and not an analysis of gender and caste.

All the three groups have differing investments in dalit identity. While the DMC disclaim dalit identity, the MRHS continue to have a (differing) investment in dalit identity, even as they proclaim the injustice of a particular dalit community. The KDWM, although composed of dalit women workers, do not take cognisance of dalit identity because of the predominance given to their identities as workers and as poor women. In the next chapter, I engage with the specific injustices that each of the groups identified as structuring their lives, as 'dalits' and in particular, as dalit women.

## **Chapter 5 (Part 1)**

# **Uncovering Injustice: Towards an Integrated Theory of Caste, Class and Gender**

### **Introduction**

In the last chapter, I examined the fissures in the conception of dalit identity by examining the ways in which it was conceived, contested, re-configured and invoked by various groups for varied purposes, in the context of dalit politics in the city of Bangalore. In this chapter, I want to flesh out and map the predominant themes that emerged from my interviews, conversations and focus group discussions. These themes are based on what the women and men I interacted with themselves identified as structuring their lives, as dalits, and in particular as dalit women. I want to foreground and analyse these themes in this chapter, by bringing out the ways in which they have been understood, while constantly keeping open the transformative possibilities for a situated dalit feminist politics.

I have categorised the ways in which the different groups and individuals explained and analysed their politics, as well as the dalit condition in the city, into the following broad themes: untouchability, the politics of food, relations of work, and gender and the sexual division of labour. The process of categorisation of these themes has been a difficult one. When I first started the process of coding, the predominant themes that I identified from the field work material were discourses around untouchability; food practices; work; responsibilities that women shouldered;



living in the city; sexuality; poverty; access to resources; living conditions in the slums; and dalit culture and its relation to feminism. In arriving at the categorisation I have used in this chapter, I have centred the following research questions:

1. How is untouchability and its relationship with gender eroded, re-shaped and reproduced within the context of the city? What are the strategies that are deployed to resist, disrupt and subvert it? How successful are these strategies, and what problems do they throw up?
2. In relation to dalit women, how is the division of labour between different caste communities and the sexual division of labour within dalit communities in Bangalore configured? What are the strategies employed to transform these relationships? What dilemmas do they throw up for dalit and feminist politics?

The importance of the question of ‘untouchability’ became apparent by the investments made by many of the men and women in food and work relations, which structured their lives as dalits. In relation to the division of labour between different caste communities and the sexual division of labour within dalit communities, there were close links to be drawn between particular constructions of sexuality, the work that dalit women did in the city and the sexual division of labour. Thereby I analyse particular constructions of heterosexuality and I also draw on understandings of menstruation to analyse the untouchability that is inflicted on dalit women. As most of the women that I met were domestic workers, I look at the specific conditions of domestic work.

I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first part centres on the broad research question of untouchability, its relationship with gender and the city. I set out the

ways in which different groups have sought to contest manifestations and understandings of untouchability. In this part, I also locate the ways in which the dalit groups I interacted with made sense of the food hierarchy which constructs them in particular ways. In part two, I locate the sexual division of labour, as well as the work that dalit women do in the city. I also interrogate particular constructions of heterosexuality and menstruation to locate a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore.

I intend to analyse and make sense of the dalit discourses around each of the categories, by using Fraser's analytical tools of 'culture' and 'economics'. Fraser uses her analytical tools to make sense of groups based on class, despised sexualities, gender and race (1997a: 11-39). I start with the presumption that caste, class and gender in Bangalore are, in Fraser's terms, bivalent collectivities; that is, the primary harms in these groups can be traced to both 'culture' and 'economics'. In this chapter, I interrogate all of the themes that were central to the groups that mobilised politically around dalit identity, in terms of where one can trace the primary harm in each instance, keeping in mind that there can be co-primary harms. This is so that I can examine the strategies employed by the groups and individuals I interacted with in terms of Fraser's matrix of recognition, redistribution, affirmation and transformation (1997a: 27).

In this chapter, therefore, I start with the theme of 'untouchability'. The effort in this section is to analyse the discourses on untouchability by my respondents; more specifically, the ways they comprehend, resist and disrupt its violence. I also attempt to locate the politics of naming this violence as such. This I suggest, is closely related



to understandings of untouchability in the context of the city, as well as to its gendered analysis.

## Untouchability

Charsley and Karanth trace the emergence of the terms 'untouchable' and 'untouchableness' to the turn of the twentieth century. In 1901, it appeared in the reports of the Census of Baroda, and eight years later, was used anew by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwar III (Charsley and Karanth, 1998: 21-22). However, the watershed came in 1910, when the controversial first attempt was made by the then census commissioner to ascertain the population of 'Untouchables', for which a set of tests were drawn up (Ambedkar, 1932: 334-335). The context of the reform and radical movements that ensued, propelled the terms, 'untouchable' as a distinct category of people and 'untouchability' as the disability suffered by them, into the political and social lexicon of India<sup>1</sup>.

Untouchability, at the stark end of a spectrum of caste-related material and symbolic violence, has been and continues to be one of the frames of reference around which dalit politics has mobilised and theoretically based itself. Much of mainstream dalit discourse on untouchability is emotionally charged, evoking deep anger and bewildered disbelief. It also evokes a particular hierarchy of caste relations, where the 'untouchable' communities are at the bottom of, indeed, outside and below, the hierarchy. Enmeshed within this classical caste hierarchy are the necessarily inter-

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<sup>1</sup> While the Constitution of India under Article 17 has abolished the practice of 'untouchability', the initial law enacted under this article, 'The Untouchability Offences Act, 1955' and the re-named 'Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976' did not define untouchability. In the current law enacted under this article, 'The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989', the term 'untouchability' is not used at all. Instead, this act defines and criminalises 'atrocities'. For an analysis of the term 'atrocities' in defining a caste-specific injury, see Rao, Anupama (1999: 230-231).

connected theories of pollution and purity, an ascribed division of labour and a regulation of the boundaries of caste.

Most writings on untouchability tend to revolve around the related ideas of its manifestations, its origins, its causes and strategies for change<sup>2</sup>. Although Ambedkar cautions us to distinguish between the untouchables and the impure in searching for the origins of untouchability<sup>3</sup>, the ideas of pollution and purity<sup>4</sup> have been central to understanding the reasons for untouchability. While the grammar of pollution and purity is seen as ordering caste relations as a whole, untouchability is understood as its starkest manifestation. The grammar of purity and impurity, in the context of untouchability, is understood to permanently or temporarily mark bodies as abject, defiling and unworthy of social interaction. Therefore, certain occupations, foods and bodily processes are considered defiling; and this defilement is then manifest as untouchability by prohibitions on connubiality, commensality and access to public places.

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on untouchability is indeed vast. In this part, instead of reviewing the already over-determined literature on untouchability, I flag some of the central ideas, contested as they are, through which untouchability is understood. For Ambedkar's writings on the issue, see Rodrigues (2002). Also see Freeman (1993), Krishnan (1996), Pathak (1996), Shrirama (1999), Lal, S (1999). This is so that I can provide the background for the project that I am interested in: a gendered analysis of untouchability and a framework for analysing untouchability in the city.

<sup>3</sup> He suggests that the impure as a class came into existence before the untouchables (1948a: 115). The project that Ambedkar was engaged in was to shift the understandings of 'impurity' as an explanation for the manifestation of untouchability to the understandings of the cause for 'impurity' itself (see his many essays on untouchability, Rodrigues, 2002). This is so that we have a framework for analysing the causes for 'impurity' and therefore a basis for political praxis. This is instead of a descriptive account of the causes for 'impurity' where the explanations are tautological. Anupama Rao (1999) elucidates this process in the context of analysing the juridical discourse on the 'atrocities' in Sirasgaon.

<sup>4</sup> The notions of pollution and purity are also understood as encompassing further conceptual polarities such as auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. Susan Bayly also suggests that 'such terms as the Hindi *shuddha/ashuddha* for purity/impurity, *sutak* for ritual pollution caused by birth and death, and *shubh/ashubh* for auspiciousness/inauspiciousness are widely used' (1999: 15).



However, I would like to suggest that most of the literature on untouchability does not easily allow for a gendered understanding of untouchability. Neither does it easily lend itself to an analysis of untouchability in the city. In the following sections, I will try and engage with the politics of untouchability to unravel the dilemmas involved in relation to these specific issues. Before that, however, I would like to lay out how I intend to analyse the material.

If we were to cite untouchability as the effect of a particular primary harm, in the terms of Fraser's framework, one of the propositions we have is that untouchability is the effect of the cultural-valuational differentiation rooted in a culture ordered in terms of purity/impurity, and is therefore an injury of misrecognition. In Fraser's matrix, this would call for various strategies of affirmative recognition, as well as cultural transformation (deconstruction). However, it can also be seen as the effect of an ascribed division of labour. Therefore it is an injury of maldistribution, calling for the remedies of affirmative and transformative redistribution. If we were to complicate this picture by bringing in the categories of caste and gender: the understandings of an ascribed division of labour as well as pollution and purity, in terms of caste, would hold in identifying the harm of untouchability. In the context of gender, however, untouchability is not necessarily understood as the primary harm of a division of labour, whereas it can be traced to the concept of pollution and purity that demarcates the bodily processes of menstruation and child birth.

This is the broad framework within which I will analyse the ways that untouchability has been understood by my respondents. The purpose of this framework is to unravel the 'recognition-redistribution dilemma' (Fraser, 1997a: 13-33). I intend to locate the

recognition-redistribution dilemma in the discourses on untouchability, by examining the politics of my respondents, as implicated by their group affiliations<sup>5</sup>, and the ways in which each of them disrupts or evokes these stories. In the following part, therefore, I want to specifically analyse the different discourses around untouchability, how it is understood, as well as the strategies employed for a transformative politics in the context of the city. I will also try to assess the usefulness of the ways in which the respondents conceive of untouchability in terms of political praxis.

## **Defining and Contesting Untouchability**

Keshavmurthy, of the pourakarmika struggle (contract street cleaners' struggle), also a member of the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS) argues that:

Untouchability is an expansive notion. It is not fixed for certain castes. Even upper caste women of a single family may face untouchability of certain types. When she is pregnant, or menstruating, nobody eats from her hand. They keep that woman apart. Untouchability obtains beyond caste. There are different varieties of untouchability. There is the untouchability that maintains patriarchy, there is the untouchability that maintains matriarchy, economic untouchability, cultural untouchability, caste untouchability, groups among various cultures, amongst various types...untouchability means 'asprushathe'. It means isolating a person/man, to not think of him as one's own, to not understand him as one's own, to have the feeling that he is the other. To not have any positive feeling towards him. To think of them as low. That feeling is untouchability. Any kind. A husband might think of his wife as low, a wife might think of her husband as low. A rich man might think of a poor man as low. In the same way, a person speaking one language might think of the other as low. In that sense....to think of someone as low. (Keshavmurthy, interview, Samvada office)

Keshavmurthy's understanding of untouchability is, as he says, expansive. While it starts off with wanting to understand a particular type of discrimination, 'not eating from someone's hand', it expands into an understanding of the feeling of 'otherness'

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<sup>5</sup> I want to clarify that there is not necessarily a consistency in group terms over the responses of each of the members of various groups that I interacted with. Therefore, in this chapter, I have organised the material to reflect individual responses to themes. However, I flag their group affiliations at every instance, and where it is crucial, I also indicate where the individual response reflects a 'group political discourse' on the matter.



and violence itself; an 'otherness'/othering process that is general, and that may occur in relation to *any* 'othered' community or category of persons. I want to examine this notion of 'untouchability' in a number of ways.

It is difficult to locate the harm that 'untouchability' is supposed to signify, either in terms of a division of labour, or in terms of a cultural valuational differentiation. Having said that, there are several interesting moves that Keshavmurthy makes with this mode of analysis. Such an expansive notion of untouchability lends itself to a gendered analysis as well as an analysis of untouchability in the city. Further, the dissociation of 'untouchability' from caste seems like a move towards a transformative recognition; where the symbolic violence of untouchability has no more power and meaning for dalit communities. However, what does this move mean? What exactly is being transformed? Does locating 'similar' injustices across a broader spectrum, diminish the power of naming an injustice as such? What does this mean for the larger question of the use of the term as a political tool for action and transformation for *dalit* communities? And importantly, what does this mean for a feminist engagement with the violence of untouchability? In the next sections, I examine these specific questions.

### ***Untouchability and Gender***

Leela Dube (1996) has been of critical importance in articulating the relationship between caste and gender. While she does not specifically speak of untouchability, she provides a context where the rules of pollution and purity, the regulation of the boundaries of caste, as well as the division of labour among caste communities, can be understood in terms of gender. I start by elaborating on her account.

In Dube's analysis, certain occupations such as midwifery, disposal of dirt and washing of dirty clothes, are polluting for 'lower' caste women. Further, menstrual pollution imposes disabilities on lower caste women in respect of food, worship of deities and ancestors. *Brahmin* women incur pollution through bodily processes such as menstruation and childbirth. They also incur pollution from widowhood and when widowed, are prohibited from cooking 'pure' food and performing *pūja* of family deities. Sexual involvement with other members of other castes is also a source of pollution. While a (dominant caste) man incurs external pollution from such involvement, a (dominant caste) woman incurs internal pollution, which is permanent. Dube firmly situates the rules of pollution and purity in the regulation of caste boundaries, through the control (and exploitation) of the sexuality of women (1996: 1-21).

There are several issues that I would like to raise at this stage. The rules of pollution and purity, while marking caste relations, cannot be equated with the grammar of untouchability, if untouchability is to retain its historical meaning of addressing the disabilities of particular *communities*<sup>6</sup>. Drawing attention to the broader meaning of untouchability, as Keshavmurthy does, may serve to deconstruct the meaning of the term in relation to dalits; but by the same token, it draws attention away from the systematic, institutionalised and 'embodied' untouchability that has been attached to dalit *people*, as a 'permanent' structuring attribute that affects them in a more ubiquitous fashion.

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<sup>6</sup>A plural and occasional understanding of untouchability, such that everyone may be 'untouchable' at certain moments, in engaging in certain activities, and in certain contexts is not the primary focus here. Also, I would like to point out that if we follow this logic, we have the absurd situation where Brahmin men are temporarily 'untouchable'.



How then do we account for a gendered understanding of untouchability? If we use Fraser's framework for a gendered analysis of untouchability, we have the proposition that it is a cultural valuational differentiation that casts the bodily processes of women as impure. However, historically, 'untouchability' has been associated and defined for specific communities. Is there then a danger of collapsing caste and gender under the rubric of Hinduism/Brahminism?<sup>7</sup> How then are we to understand what constitutes untouchability for *dalit women*?<sup>8</sup>

Anupama Rao suggests that 'caste regulation (especially the ideology of untouchability) provides the legitimating structure for understanding the forms of physical and symbolic violence that dalit bahun women endure' (Rao, 2003a: 7). In her remarkable reading of events in Sirasgaon<sup>9</sup>, she makes several interesting points about the dislocations in the juridical discourse on 'untouchability'. There is, she suggests, a dislocation of the stripping of the (dalit) women from other practices of untouchability (such as not using main roads, or having access to common sources of water). The judge cannot (and does not) even comprehend why the women were targeted, but what he does comprehend: the caste-based 'tensions' between the 'harijans' and the Hindus in Sirasgaon, he takes note of, but does not *interrogate*. In his reasoning, these tensions are self-evident. Therefore, as Rao argues, the judge depicted a 'Gandhian moral outrage', so much so that the effects of untouchability

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<sup>7</sup> See Omvedt (1995). This is especially important when, as Dube suggests, 'it is well known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with Shudras' (1996: 10).

<sup>8</sup> It is important to reiterate that dominant caste women are *temporarily* 'untouchable', whereas dalit women are considered permanently 'untouchable'. The latter may also be seen as incurring 'surplus sporadic untouchability'. I discuss the discourses around this aspect of the untouchability faced by dalit women in the second part of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> In 1963, four dalit women were stripped and paraded naked through the streets of the village of Sirasgaon. Rao's study is engaged in analysing the 'events' surrounding the case, as well as the

were delinked from the political conditions that sustained them. However, none of this is straightforward. As Rao indicates and I wish to emphasise, '[...] the judicial arguments "work" by constantly distracting us from that unspoken impossible: an elaboration of what untouchability *is*' (1999: 224).

There are several issues that have to be raised in this context. To specify from Rao's analysis, there is a disarticulation about the *definition* of untouchability. Anupama Rao argues that this 'distortion [...] lies in the judge (and juridical reason) being unable to employ categories such as those of desire, sexual violence, and expressions of masculinity (or emasculation) historically, as part of the narrative that rounds off other more visible effects of untouchability' (1999: 226). While being able to employ these categories is crucial to begin to conceptualise untouchability in relation to dalit women, I would argue that it is also crucial to attend to the tensions around *defining* untouchability. This is because while, 'not using main roads, not having access to common sources of water' are understood as manifestations of untouchability, there is a difficulty in naming untouchability as such, *beyond* these manifestations<sup>10</sup>.

To embed untouchability in the conditions that produce it, in the instance of dalit women, we have to attend, as Rao suggests, to the 'ways in which the regulation of desire through marriage, the maintenance of caste purity, and sexual violence against women are connected to what happened' (1999: 227). It seems therefore that a gendered account of untouchability, in specific relation to women, is connected to constructions of sexuality, as it relates to the boundedness of caste. While this kind

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juridical discourse on the case. She is interested in the uncovering the meanings of the 'atrocities' for a politics of caste, gender and desire (Rao, 1999: 204-247).

<sup>10</sup> I will argue that this disarticulation is not just in terms of gender, but also in terms of understanding untouchability in the city.



of analysis in relation to the discourses of the respondents is beyond the ambit of this thesis, I will suggest that dalit women also suffer from a *surplus sporadic* form of untouchability, which is connected to the specificity of the practices of menstruation and parturition amongst dalit communities. I examine the discourses around these aspects of untouchability, as they relate to dalit women, in the section on gender and the sexual division of labour (Chapter 5, Part 2).

### ***‘Who Says We Are Untouchable’? DMC’s Politics of Inversion***

The individuals at the Dalit mathu Mahila Chaluvalli (DMC) have a fairly standard, though incredibly provocative, response to the notion of untouchability. Through the course of my field work, some of my conversations with members of the DMC took on a certain pattern. Since DMC has an extremely fluid politics, I was constantly trying to question them about how they understand each of the categories that traditionally make the caste hierarchy, such as occupation, pollution/purity, endogamy of castes and so on. On the question of untouchability, many times, one of the first questions I would be stumped with is, *‘do you think we are untouchable?’*<sup>11</sup>

That constantly threw me, because there seemed no right answer when the attempt was to work out the building blocks of the structure of caste. ‘Untouchability exists, whether I think it or not’, wasn’t the most incisive response, when the objective was to disrupt the equations of where each of us was placed in the caste hierarchy. Chenappa’s *‘it is not our problem, we don’t think we are untouchable’* (conversation, DMC office) seems even more anarchic.

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<sup>11</sup> Chandru and Kasim especially would provoke every discussion of untouchability away from an analysis of its presence ‘out there’ to one in the here and now, *between us*.

I want to suggest that this mode of analysis is at once confrontational and an act of reclamation of agency. This rhetoric in DMC's politics is a powerful mode of articulating the power relations that operate to enforce untouchability. It retains the import of the violence of untouchability, even as it reclaims the agency of its 'victims'. What this does, in effect, is to *shift the associations of untouchability from 'untouchable' people to the people who practice untouchability.*

Here, I would like to make certain distinctions between Keshavmurthy's expansive understanding of untouchability (above) and the DMC's politics of inversion. It seems at first, that at the level of the naming of violence, both discourses are engaged in disrupting the power of the violence for caste communities. However, while in Keshavmurthy's account, the term 'untouchability' has no meaning because it is so dissipated, in DMC's account, it has meaning, only a radically disruptive one. This is indicated when Yashoda elaborates on it:

I do not think of us as 'untouchables', but we can look at it like this, 'don't touchable'. We did not let them touch us. That is a way of looking at it as well. Instead of looking at everything as their fault, we might also have said it like this. ...yes, we don't like to be untouchables. Ambedkar says the same as well. We are not 'untouchables'. We are not people who are not to be touched, we can be touched, but we are 'don't touchables'. I completely agree with Ambedkar on this issue. (Yashoda, interview, DMC office)

I would like to suggest that in this account, there seems to be a powerful subversion of the notion of pollution and purity that informs the classical notion of caste hierarchy. The schematic of untouchability requires impure bodies and subjection, and where none is forthcoming, at least a symbolic battle is won. The transition from the 'untouchable' object, to a subject reclaiming control over its own body and sense of self, 'You don't touch us', seems to be a restoration of the subject's transformative capacity. This transition, it seems, allows for an interaction on different terms. With 'don't touchables', the 'untouchable' is no longer someone who is abject and



unworthy of social interaction, no longer outside and below the caste hierarchy; they are outside and above it.

This has resonance with ‘untouchability’ as it circulates in Anglo-American discourse, where the term has quite the opposite meaning from its meanings in India. It refers to someone of high moral character, someone who cannot be bought or corrupted, as well as someone who is powerful, outside and above the law, well-near unaccountable for what they do. Untouchability in this sense is a function of power, such ‘untouchables’ indeed cannot be touched, like Eliot Ness and his band of law men, who were set the task in the 1930s of tackling Al Capone and Chicago gangsterism<sup>12</sup>.

Claiming this other usage and the power it proclaims, provides a rhetoric that feeds the personal battles of the individuals at the DMC speaking its radical language. However, there is also a sense of dissipation in the DMC strategy of shifting the focus onto the *people who practise untouchability*. With this move of talking about untouchability in ‘fault’ and ‘want’ terms, the meanings of untouchability as a deep, reprehensible structural violence seem to dissipate.

Untouchability is a schema that creates abject bodies, ‘untouchable’, unworthy of social interaction. In DMC’s question, ‘do you think we are untouchable?’, there is a shift in this schema: it creates a different set of unworthy subjects, the ones practising untouchability. However, the question is, can this meaning be made to stick? Is this a meaning that will hold up under duress? Also, by then dissipating the meaning of

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<sup>12</sup> This episode in US history has been fictionalised repeatedly. See for example, Brian de Palma’s 1987 film, ‘The Untouchables’ (Paramount Studios).

untouchability itself, does DMC lose the transformative potential of the politics of naming violence? <sup>13</sup>

Can we then classify this strategy as a transformative one for dalit politics, when the violence of untouchability is a reality for dalit people today? Does this allow for the possibility of abolishing the practice of untouchability? I suggest that this issue is too deeply embedded in caste relations to be resolved with an engagement with the politics of naming violence alone. It can only be unravelled by addressing the specific issues that inform caste relations, such as food practices and work hierarchies. I will analyse DMC's strategies and understandings on these specific issues in the sections on food (below) and gender, caste and the sexual division of labour (see part two of this chapter).

### *Tracing the Harm of Untouchability in Terms of Culture and Economics*

Ganganna of the Dalit Kranti Dal, also a member of the MRHS, does not necessarily engage with the politics of naming the violence of untouchability as such. He is also more specific about what untouchability signifies. He takes recourse to the language of humanism in his understanding of untouchability. His puzzlement about the reasons for untouchability are elaborated in the double standards that he sees in the practices of the dominant caste communities:

If we think of Muslims, they eat beef, they are the ones who slaughter the meat, but the *brahmins, lingayats, vokkaligas*, they let them in their houses...some of them eat in

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<sup>13</sup> There is an analogy to be made with the issue of rape in two ways. The stigma attached to rape has instigated feminists to suggest that we need to deconstruct the power of the violence of rape by deconstructing the meaning of rape. That is the reason why there have been calls from many quarters to term it as 'assault'. On the other hand, there has been a contestation of the repression of (hetero) sexuality by feminists who have claimed the right to sexual expression. In the two instances, there has been a deconstruction of the meaning of rape as well as the meaning of victimhood. However, in instances of rape trials, ie., in times of duress, the latter understanding may not stick. On the other hand, the power of naming sexual violence as rape, especially when there are attempts at shifting the focus onto the perpetrator, will be lost if it is to be understood in terms of 'assault'.



each other's places. Muslims and Christians, they eat it. They (dominant caste communities) are ready to accept them, but us, *holeya-madigas*, they are not ready to accept...Now, the dog, it's a dog...it eats shit, it does all sorts of things, it eats all that, and then they have it on their beds that they sleep in...isn't that so? But, they think that we are lower than that. The dog, eating shit, sleeping on their beds, it licks their faces, touches them, they are ready to accept that, these people; but the ones who work for them, who suffer, who labour in the fields, who keep them content, they are not ready to accept them. They are lower than dogs, that is the extent to which they think/see. This is our society. That is why it pains me so much, when I hear about things like that, it hurts me... (Ganganna, interview, Samvada)

In this account, Ganganna talks about the manifestations of 'untouchability' as well as the causes of untouchability. Ganganna identifies the disabilities that *dalit* communities suffer in terms of their manifestations in prohibitions on touch, commensality and lack of *acceptance*. In understanding the causes for these disabilities, Ganganna implicitly suggests that it is supposedly connected to the act/occupation (of slaughtering cows), as well as consumption of beef. In his account, beef-eating is supposed to be an explanation for 'untouchability'. However, he expresses incomprehension of the differences in attitudes towards Muslims, Christians *and dogs* as against dalit people.

Ganganna deconstructs the commonplace accounts of untouchability in terms of the intrinsic 'lowness' of beef-eating. In such accounts, which draw on hierarchies of purity and pollution, the practice of beef-eating is the explanation for 'untouchable' status. He discounts this explanation by drawing attention to inconsistencies: Christians and Muslims are not subject to the same criteria<sup>14</sup>. His example of dogs is even more emphatic. Ganganna attempts therefore, to deconstruct the association of

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<sup>14</sup> I would like to be a bit cautious in assessing the discourse on beef-eating amongst Muslim and Christian communities. While there are hierarchies amongst these communities that mark some amongst them as 'dalit' (see Sikand, 2003, Japhet, 1997: see appendix, Webster, 1999), I would suggest that there are prohibitions on commensality and connubiality directed against these communities as a whole as well. However, this is not part of the ambit of the thesis, therefore, I would not want to make any conclusive remarks.

the practices that mark communities as ‘untouchable’, by broadening the horizon of people (and animals) that partake in those practices.

Ganganna also makes specific connections between other work that dalit people (are ‘meant’ to) do and the violence of untouchability:

For us, how it is...it is the feeling with which they view us. As low. As people who make shoes. As people who pick up shit. We shouldn’t let them into our houses, not to give water, to give us water and food from a distance...we have to understand from the way they treat us. (Ganganna, interview, Samvada office)

Therefore, in Ganganna’s accounts, the primary cause for ‘untouchability’ is one of a cultural valuational differentiation: an account of dalit people as low, as unworthy of interaction. This construction of dalit people is based on a matrix of *how* food practices and the work that dalit people do are conceived, i.e. in terms of a value-hierarchy of purity/pollution, in which such practices are ranked. Ganganna’s method of countering the deep prejudice is to use a humanistic language, as well as arguing for the worth of the work that dalit people do and the contributions that they make towards society. He is therefore making a move within the politics of recognition, aimed at challenging the criteria of value in play.

To be more specific, food practices and the work that dalit people do, are caught up in the matrix of untouchability. Therefore, it is important to examine both the meanings of food practices, as well as the work structure and relations, to unravel possibilities for a transformative political praxis. There are many ways in which I want to analyse the relationship between work and untouchability.

If untouchability is a consequence of a cultural valuational differentiation between dalit people and dominant caste people, what are the possible modes with which one



can transform these relationships? Ganganna's suggestion is to re-value the work. His method it seems, is one of an affirmative recognition of the work that dalit people do. Yet my reading of this complex of work/food practices, is that they are clearly embedded very deeply within *economic* relations<sup>15</sup>. I will examine these issues in the following sections.

Since Ganganna is a member of the MRHS, there are ways in which MRHS *can* explore the notion of untouchability by subjecting the untouchability practised within the *dalit* communities to scrutiny. I am suggesting that if there are norms of a cultural valuational differentiation that stem from either the work that people do, or the different food practices of various communities, that operate within the schema of untouchability, one could shed light on what goes into the making of those norms by examining the relations between 'untouchable' communities.

Ganganna allows us a glimpse into the practices of untouchability within dalit communities when asked about the differences between communities:

Take for instance, the *vaddas* and *lambanis* and the *nayaks*, they are all 'touchables'. They do not consider the *madigas* as individuals. I am a *madiga*. The *bovis*, meaning, *vaddas*, once they know that we are *madigas*, they do not let us into their houses. (Ganganna, interview)

However, this is an area that is too close to home for the particular politics that Ganganna engages in, as a member of the MRHS. From offering us a glimpse of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ambedkar for instance has indicated the economic benefits to be gained by 'untouchability': 'The system of untouchability is a goldmine to the Hindus. In it the 240 millions of Hindus have 60 millions of Untouchables to serve as their retinue to enable the Hindus to maintain pomp and ceremony and to cultivate a feeling of pride and dignity befitting a master class, which cannot be fostered and sustained unless there is beneath it a servile class to look down upon. In it the [...] Hindus have the [...] untouchables to be used as forced labourers. In it the [...] Hindus have the [...] untouchables to do the dirty work of scavengers and sweepers which the Hindu is debarred by his religion to do and which must be done by non-Hindus who could be no other than Untouchables'. (as

practice of untouchability within dalit communities, Ganganna moves on to explain untouchability as an injustice perpetrated by dominant caste communities. Ganganna, therefore, given his particular stake in dalit politics in the city, is unwilling to explore what allows for such discriminatory practices *within* the ‘untouchable’ communities.

### *Untouchability in the City?*

In the vast literature on untouchability, there is not much literature that discusses or analyses the manifestations of untouchability in the city. There is an acknowledgement from some quarters that ‘in many metropolitan areas, “untouchability” has seemingly attenuated, but is practised with sophisticated concealment in a variety of ingenious ways’ (Krishnan, 1996: 129). However the understanding that the ‘Untouchables are better off and more politically active in the city’ (Lynch, 1969: 210) still reverberates. This, as I have suggested, is linked to the centrality of the village in the dalit imaginary, as well as to what one imagines as the *contents* of untouchability.

The question of untouchability, as a particular form of discrimination, therefore, is a difficult one in the city. I want to suggest that there is an experienced sense of an inability to articulate the nature of untouchability in the city. Ganganna of the Dalit Kranti Dal and MRHS, when asked about how he understands dalit identity, *in the first instance*<sup>16</sup>, stops short of explaining how it is experienced in the city, especially in terms of *untouchability*:

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cited in Baxi, 1995: 133). Also see the section on the DSS, where the importance of the symbolic critique of the division of labour is highlighted (Chapter 3).

<sup>16</sup> I want to emphasise that when questioned further, on say the question of slums, Ganganna would make connections, but the point I want to make is this: unravelling caste relations does not immediately bring the imagined landscape of the city into the picture. And this is because of the disarticulation that I am talking about.



The dalit identity obtains in particular ways, in the city and in the villages. In the villages, they do not allow us into their homes...these are things that have happened in my life, making us sit aside, pouring tea and water from a distance, serving us differently. (Ganganna, interview, Samvada office)

I want to suggest that this sense of disarticulation, this lack of discourse on caste-based discrimination in the city, in the language of untouchability, is because of two things: an inability to *define* untouchability and how one understands caste relations in the city, viz. what one imagines as the effects of caste relations in the city. This disarticulation is linked to the popular discourse on untouchability and the stories that the violence depicts, so much so that it is difficult to dissociate an economy of caste in the village and untouchability. Furthermore, it is linked to a politics of naming violence as ‘untouchability’ itself.

However, there is a strong sense that things are *different* in the city. The city as a space of change, of mobility is a popular discourse amongst many of the people I met and interacted with. For instance, Lakshmi, a dalit woman living in Ragiguda slum, talked of her experiences in her home in Nelamangala, and the violence in terms of untouchability as well as the burden of work that dalit people endured. Having moved to the city in difficult circumstances as a young married girl of 16, she was still emphatic that living in Bangalore was better than the difficult circumstances of her natal home because she did not face untouchability here (conversation, Ragiguda slum).

The women at Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement had a far more complex relation with their understandings of untouchability and relating it to their lives in the city. For a start, they did not refer to the discrimination that they faced as

*asprushathe*, ‘untouchability’. When asked about untouchability, they related the violence that they faced (‘these things’) to food practices at first and then to their identity as poor people. In terms of the manifestations of untouchability, and an explicit acknowledgement of its manifestations, especially in the city, the women were hesitant. How the women dealt with this is illustrated in the following:

Eshwaramma: Yesterday, you know that woman Dargi (Lakshmamma: the woman from the house with a gate) when I went to fill water, she had her pot in the water, mine was so far away, and she tells me, ‘lift your pot and keep it far, you have put it so close’...I said, ‘what is in it, that I cannot keep it close?’ ‘Whatever it is, keep it far’.

Narsamma: Now, nobody creates divisions (treats us unequally), nobody does that.

Eshwaramma: There isn’t anything like that, it is much better than before.

Narsamma: Before it used to be quite bad, now it is so much better.

Lakshmamma: Much better.

Narsamma: When we were young, there used to be a lot of it, in our areas. If we fill water from the borewell, when they used to keep their pots, they would wash and wash, clean and clean and then keep their pots. If we filled water, they, the *gowdas*, would let the water flow, clean it and then fill water. I once asked them, “has something got stuck there?” “Why should we put our pots where you put them, that is why we wash and then put it there”. “Go *amma*, you are a human being, I am a human being, why do you do this?”...about 15-20 years ago...at my mother’s house.

Lakshmamma: Here nobody does that, as you said, it is based on money. We might be poor, we might have a little less money, but I am a *hengasu* (woman), you are woman, she is a woman, all of us are women. But it goes according to clothes, money, building, that is how I understand it. (interview, Karianpalya slum)

The language of humanism in the women’s accounts, is the rhetoric employed to reclaim subjectivity in these everyday erasures of a sense of self. The need to distance oneself from these erasures of sense of self through time (it happened before, it doesn’t anymore, not now) space (in the village, but not here) and language (these things), can be read as a means through which women cope with these everyday instances of violence. I want to suggest that the move that the women make of distancing themselves from the violence, apart from being a strategy to cope, is also an illustration of the two things: an incomprehension of how to examine untouchability in the context of the city and crucially, the politics of naming violence in terms of untouchability.



It is significant that Lakshamma sees the discrimination that they face in the context of their lives in the city as being caused by their economic situation. The specific language that the women in the slums of Karianapalya use to examine the discrimination, that was initially understood as the cultural-valuational differentiation of them as *madiga* people, has shifted to an analysis of the discrimination based on *economics*, of them being poor, thereby opening up different possibilities for justice and transformative claims. It seems that the symbolic violence associated with being *madiga* is far more than the symbolic violence of being poor. This provides some contrast to the ‘embarrassment’ of caste amongst dominant caste communities (see Chapter 1 and 4). While dominant caste communities leave caste relations un-interrogated because of their embarrassment, the women at KDWM point toward the violence of caste relations. Leaving aside the ‘contradictions’<sup>17</sup> in the women’s account for the moment, I want to argue that there is a requirement to understand accounts of caste relations in the city.

Talking about the caste system in the city, Sr. Celia of the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM) says:

The caste system is not strong here. Even though they sprinkle water on the dishes before using them (referring to dominant caste women re-washing, at least symbolically, the dishes already washed by domestic workers) the caste system, they cannot practise it here. At all. That is the big difference. It is because people here do not know who the person is. That’s why I think, while going out (of their homes), the lower caste may think that they will, but nobody can recognise you as lower caste. (interview, KDWM office)

There is a gap in Sr. Celia’s account, on the relation between caste relations in the city and ‘untouchability’. Though Sr. Celia herself would argue that the

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<sup>17</sup> Along with Fraser (1997a: 11-12), I would argue that the ‘contradictions’ cannot be read as false consciousness, but as resistant readings, an engagement in the politics of recognition, fraught with contested meanings.

discrimination that dalit women domestic workers face at their places of work can be understood in terms of ‘untouchability’ (conversation, KDWM office), she hesitates to articulate a particular story about caste relations. Anonymity, as in Lakshmi’s account, does transform caste relations in the city.

Ganganna reiterates this hesitation when he talks about the practices of discrimination against dalit people:

In Bangalore, we can’t surmise too much, because people are not willing to divulge their castes. If I say I am *madiga*, they won’t rent me a house. So they generally say that they are of a different caste. (Interview, Samvada office)

However, in Ganganna’s account, the anonymity is contrived: *if dominant caste people knew, things would be different*. Therefore, it seems that in Ganganna’s account, caste relations are not really that different in the city; what is different, is the possibilities for *performance* in the city. And in this account, Ganganna has also shifted the possible outcomes of such knowledge. It is not anymore about *touch*, it is about *prohibition of access to ‘private’ spaces*. However, Ganganna does not explicitly allude to this as ‘untouchability’.

So far, I have made several points about understanding ‘untouchability’ in the context of the city. One is that there is a difficulty in articulating untouchability and caste relations in the city. This is related to conceptions of caste relations being *different* in the city, as well as ‘untouchability’ meaning a specific form of discrimination encircling a traditional conception of caste hierarchy, where economic, social and cultural relations in the city are not features of the imagined landscape. Also, there is a contestation around the politics of naming violence as untouchability.



How then is one to understand the violence in dalit people's lives in the city? Is there a language to speak of this violence, except to name it as violence and discrimination? I want to examine these issues with a painful story about his life that Ganganna narrates, and nowhere in its narration does he attribute it to untouchability or his being *madiga*:

You know this Vishnu Bhavan Hotel in Majestic? The owner of that hotel, it was his factory. What he did was,...while he was running this, he opened a cement factory in Gulbarga. Hoysala Cement. Taking the capital out of this unit, thinking he might have to pay us for rescinding us, he opened the cement factory and closed this one. At that time, I faced a lot of difficulty. Difficulty meaning, not that much or this much, a lot! I fell at his feet. "Give me some work, I am facing a lot of difficulty"...at that time, my children were small. "Any work, it is difficult for me to eat..." even at that time, my situation was terrible. In the factory, the toilets there, in that place, I used to keep a box, put a vessel on it, put wood in there and cook and eat. I used to eat there itself and sleep, in the toilet. That kind of difficulty, I have suffered in the factory. After having suffered like that, at last, giving me 500 or 1000 rupees or something, he says to me, "no, there is no work, go find it somewhere else" and sent me away. (Ganganna, interview)

If we were to ask the sterile question of the primary cause of the suffering in this instance, to even begin to articulate a politics of transformation, we have to comprehend the nature of the discrimination and to name it in particular ways. In Ganganna's account, he finds himself in the situation that he does because of his dispensability as a worker. It seems that if Ganganna's economic situation was better, the meanings of the violence, in terms of the sense of utter indignity, the feelings of deep despair, would be transformed. Therefore, it seems that one of the strategies for justice would be an affirmative redistribution, articulated probably in terms of workers' rights; and another would be a transformative redistribution, where it is not just a question of wages and contracts for rescinding, but a complete reallocation of resources, so that he is not at the mercy of someone's generosity.

Having said that, I would like to revisit the question of untouchability, discrimination and the politics of naming in the context of the city. The power of the discourse on untouchability is its ability to name and articulate a terrible caste-based violence. The politics of naming violence as 'untouchability' in DMC's account creates victims, and therefore, its strategy for redressal is a radical deconstructive re-fashioning of the discourse on untouchability. In their 'who says we are untouchable?' rhetoric, they articulate this re-fashioning by a performative inversion of the sense of selves of both dominant caste communities and dalit communities. In the sense in which they conceive it, untouchability is not their problem, it is the problem of the people who practise it. However, by all accounts, including I am sure DMC's, this inversion is inadequate on its own. It is difficult to transform the practice of untouchability using only a transformative recognition politics, in terms of untouchability alone. It is caste relations as a whole that have to be transformed.

If we are to name the violence inflicted on Ganganna as untouchability, we have to draw links between untouchability and the meanings of caste relations in terms of their articulation in the city. This also has to be understood in the context of the politics of naming violence itself. Furthermore, it is related to the discourses around how and whether caste relations have to be transformed.

In analysing the tests drawn up for identifying 'untouchables' as a *community*,

Ambedkar wrote:

[...] There is no legal definition of untouchability and there cannot be any. Untouchability does not express itself through the hair of the head or the colour of the skin. It is not a matter of blood. Untouchability expresses itself in modes of treatment and observance of certain practices [...] point I wish to emphasize is the futility of insisting upon the application of uniform tests of untouchability all over India. It is a fundamental mistake to suppose that differences in tests of untouchability indicate differences in the conditions of the untouchables. On a correct analysis of the mental



attitude they indicate, it will be found that whether the test is causing pollution by touch or refusal to use common well, the notion underlying both is one and the same. Both are outward registers of the inward feeling of defilement, odium, aversion and contempt. Why will not a Hindu touch an untouchable? Why will not a Hindu allow an untouchable to enter the temple or use the village well? Why will not a Hindu admit an untouchable in the inn? The answer to each of these questions is the same. It is that the untouchable is an unclean person not for social intercourse [...] If our aim is to demarcate the class of people who suffer from social odium then it matters very little which test we apply. (1932: 96)

In summation, and drawing from Ambedkar's account, it seems that we might be better served if we were to comprehend the violence of untouchability as relational rather than substantive. In this way, it is futile to identify untouchability in terms of the substantive attributes of those who are subjected to such relationships. Furthermore, these attributes may differ across different contexts and may change over time, such that the substantive condition of the 'untouchables' may improve, without altering the relationship. Having said that, it is also important to unravel the logic behind the continuing infliction of the violence. In the next sections, I examine the politics of food and the question of work, in the discourses of the respondents to situate their strategies against the violence of untouchability.

## **The Politics of Food**

In this section I want to examine the ways in which food practices can be understood, given the many connections that are made with food and the violence of untouchability. Before I examine the ways in which the groups and individuals I engaged with understand food practices and the strategies they employ to transform relations, I want to set out the food hierarchy as it is understood by the dominant caste Hindu discourse. First, however, I will clarify a few things.

### *A Gendered Understanding of 'Food Relations'?*

One of the gendered readings of food practices has been to understand women as the transmitters of culture and therefore that, 'the task of safeguarding food, averting danger, and in a broad sense attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food, falls upon women' (Dube, 1996: 6). Dube is interested in articulating the relationship between caste and gender. In her framework, food is a carrier of pollution and purity. The hierarchical ordering of food therefore imparts pollution and purity. Women are entrusted with the task of 'averting danger'. Further, relations of commensality are critical to the ranking of castes. Prescriptions and prohibitions of food are governed by kinship, marriage and sexuality, for instance, upper caste widows are prohibited from eating certain foods (Dube: 1996: 6,7).

I would like to unravel this argument in terms of Fraser's analytical categories. If we are to understand a *gendered* food hierarchy, in terms of the analytical categories of culture and economics, we have the following propositions: the cultural meanings of food prescribe and prohibit the consumption of certain food, for instance, for upper caste widows. And a division of labour in the production of food sustains women as the principal makers of food. On the other hand, if we are to analyse the food hierarchy in terms of *caste*, we have the following propositions: the cultural meanings of food mark communities as *beef-eating*; and a division of labour within caste relations sustain differential food practices.

In relation to a gendered understanding of food practices, to start with the 'economics' of food (in terms of a perspectival dualism), a division of labour in



food-making within the home is sustained by the cultural meanings of what women are *meant to do*. On the other hand, if we are to look at the cultural meanings of food in gendered terms, I would suggest (as does Dube) that the prescriptive and prohibitive aspects of consumption of food in relation to certain women at certain times, are specifically to do with constructions and control of their *sexuality*. While it seems that the notion of pollution and purity is what holds the (gendered and caste) cultural constructions of food relations together (in terms of a demarcation of caste boundaries), I would suggest that we have to specifically engage with the meanings of sexuality of dalit women and dominant caste women. Further, if we hardwire sexuality to a construction of the food hierarchy, this does not allow us to examine the meanings of the food hierarchy for *dalit* people. Therefore, I examine the questions of the gendered division of labour in terms of the specific responsibilities that this lays on dalit women, and the different constructions of sexuality in the section, 'Gender and the Sexual Division of Labour' (Chapter 5, Part 2). In this section therefore, I will examine the food hierarchy in the context of *caste relations*.

Getting back to Fraser's analytical categories in the context of caste relations, to ask the question again: where do food practices of different communities fall within the analytical spectrum of culture and economics? If we understand food practices of communities as being based on cultural difference, are these differences to be celebrated, transformed or taken on as an ethic for everyone? On the other hand, can we understand food practices as a fall-out of the economic situation of dalit people, a consequence of the division of labour in caste communities? These are difficult questions, and to keep from circularity, we have to remember the purpose of Fraser's framework. She wishes to explore the contradictions that arise between conflicting

claims of justice, in terms of a perspectival dualism, in order that we may arrive at a framework, a politics of transformation (Fraser, 1997a: 31-33).

### *The Food Hierarchy*

The broad food hierarchy in India would suggest an order of superiority that goes down from vegetarianism<sup>18</sup>, meat eating (no beef) to beef-eating<sup>19</sup>. The principle that brings cohesion to this hierarchy is that amongst dominant caste-Hindu communities in India, it is taboo to eat beef. At the heart of this taboo is a belief in the sacredness of the cow. The communities that contravene this taboo in India are dalit communities, indigenous communities, Muslims and Christians<sup>20</sup>. In the food hierarchy, therefore, an oppositional principle is set up in relation to those who revere the cow and those 'who do not', by connecting this reverence or lack thereof with beef-eating.

Further, the principle of vegetarianism as a superior ethic is enmeshed with values of 'non-violence', as is the taboo on beef-eating with reverence for the cow. This finds expression in Gandhi's religio-spiritual ethic:

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<sup>18</sup> Vegetarianism is understood in different terms in India. The correlation in the 'west' would be vegan. That is why in 'pure' vegetarian eating places in India, it would be heresy to serve eggs in any shape or form.

<sup>19</sup> Of the 751 scheduled caste communities listed by KS Singh, 404 (53.8 per cent) are non-vegetarian. 104 communities (13.8 per cent) consume cow beef, whereas 117 communities (15.6 per cent) consume ox beef; 358 (47.7 per cent) eat pork and 27 (3.6 per cent) eat carrion. Singh suggests that *madiga* communities eat beef and pork, *holeya* communities eat beef, but no pork; and *vadda* communities are non-vegetarian, but do not consume either pork or beef (1993: 5, 600, 830). He does not specify the type of beef *madiga* and *holeya* communities eat, but it would seem like they eat all beef.

<sup>20</sup> As I have suggested earlier, an analysis of the differences between dalit, Muslim, Christian and indigenous communities in terms of their relation to the food hierarchy is outside the ambit of this thesis. However, see Jodhka and Dhar (2003) where they suggest that the killing of five dalit men by a crowd of Hindu men in Dulina, Haryana in 2002 for what appeared to be a case of mistaken impression that cow slaughter was being committed openly, was in fact a case of mistaken identity. They suggest that the crowd that killed the five men believed them to be muslim, reflecting the simmering communal tensions in Haryanvi society. It also reflects the web of complex relations that are entwined with the food hierarchy in India.



I consider that God has not created lower forms of animal life for man to use them as he will. Man realized his station not by indulging but by abstinence. I have no right to destroy animal life if I can subsist healthily on vegetable life. I have no right to slaughter all animal life because I find it necessary to slaughter some animal life. Therefore, if I can live well on goats, fish and fowl (surely enough in all conscience) it is sin for me to destroy cows for my sustenance. And it was some such argument that decided the rishis of old in regarding the cow as sacred, especially when they found that the cow was the greatest economic asset in national life. And I see nothing wrong, immoral or sinful in offering worship to an animal so serviceable as the cow so long as my worship does not put her on a level with her Creator. I immensely appreciate the idea (so emphasised by Islam) that special worship must be reserved for the Creator of us all. But I must not mix up cow-worship and cow-slaughter. [...] cow slaughter is indefensible on moral grounds. (1920: 421)

In this discourse, the food hierarchy is set up in a number of ways. Firstly, there is a hierarchy of consumption based on the principles of non-violence and necessity. Secondly, non-violence is understood in terms of a graded valuation of living things. At the top of this hierarchy is the sacred cow, an important economic unit, integral to the ecology of the village. Cow-slaughter and beef-eating then, in this discourse, become immoral and insatiable acts.

Though it is Muslim communities that Gandhi seems to be addressing in this instance<sup>21</sup>, the food hierarchy he describes, also corresponds to a broad classical caste hierarchy, with the brahmins at the top and the dalit communities at the bottom. I would like to put in context the power of this discourse on food practices, as well as its 'neat' associations with the classical caste hierarchy. This classical enunciation of the food hierarchy is far more messy in practice, especially when it comes to what communities eat, and what they are meant to eat. Also, there are many regional and community variations to be found. Saraswat Brahmins eat fish in the coastal regions of Karnataka and some Jain communities only eat plant produce that grows over-ground. Further, there are several communities in the 'middle' of the caste hierarchy

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<sup>21</sup> See Prashad (2000) where he talks of Gandhi's food practices in the specific context of dalit communities.

that are vegetarian, such as the *bania* and *lingayat* communities. However, the ethic against cow slaughter and the attendant taboo against beef-eating, along with vegetarianism as a superior ethic because of its 'minimal' violence, continue to frame the discourse around food practices in India.

Having said that, it is beef and buffalo meat that are the most highly consumed meat products in India. The Indian Agro Industry figures suggest that the consumption of beef/buffalo is 2.8 kg per capita, about half that of fish, but more than twice the average intake of mutton, pork and poultry (no date). Further, the meat India produces most is beef (1.44 million tonnes in 2000), the second is buffalo meat (1.42 million tonnes) and third is mutton and lamb (Reddy, R, 2001), contributing to the 4,500 *crore* (45,000 million) cattle industry, of which bulls and male calves are the mainstay (Damodaran, 2003). Understood as the 'common man's diet' (Krishnakumar, 2003; Bidwai, 2003), it is also the cheapest meat product costing about Rs. 50 a kilo as against Rs. 120 for mutton (Krishnakumar, 2003; Jain, S, 2003). This is despite most states in India prohibiting the slaughter of cows<sup>22</sup>. The prohibition on the slaughter of cows has meant that states like Karnataka have had to transport cattle to the neighbouring state of Kerala to be slaughtered.

In recent months, there has been an attempt by the majority Bharatiya Janata Party in central government, to pass a central law prohibiting the slaughter of cows with the Prevention of Cruelty to Cows Bill, 2003<sup>23</sup>. The bill was cleared by the cabinet and

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<sup>22</sup> Exceptions are Kerala and West Bengal. Some states allow only for the slaughter of dying cows (Jain, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> This bill has taken its legal sanction from Article 48 of the Constitution of India which states, 'Organisation of agriculture and animal husbandry – The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle'.



was 'introduced' in the lower house of the parliament in the monsoon session last year, amidst much controversy. After this, the government decided that it would re-introduce the bill upon establishing 'consensus' (Rajalaksmi, 2003). If this bill becomes law, it has the power to override state laws on the regulation of the slaughter of cows. However, amidst the wide-spread opposition to this bill (Bidwai, 2003; also see Khan, D, 2002, Anand, 2002), the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh cleared the Madhya Pradesh Cow Slaughter Ban Ordinance in the January of 2004, with the *official* argument that the 'Manu Smriti ranks the slaughterer of cow as a predator and prescribes hard punishment for him' (Gupta, S, 2004a, 2004b).

The politically charged atmosphere around the ban on cow slaughter is not indicative of a recent change in the policy of the BJP (Iliah, 1996a). Apart from the political opportunism that has allowed for the recent attempts at regulating the already regulated cattle industry, a book by DN Jha entitled *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, was banned in the August of 2001 after generating a lot of controversy around the association of Vedic India with beef consumption (Jha, 2002: ix-xii). It is in this volatile context that I want to examine the politics of food, as understood by the dalit groups and individuals that I met.

### ***The Lie of the Land: A Critique of Food Practices***

There are very interesting investments made in food by all the groups and individuals that I interacted with. Food is a seemingly obvious marker of caste, and the investments made in unravelling the violence associated with such a basic human need in terms of self-perception, as well as a group, are fairly deep. Though the critiques of the food hierarchy amongst people I spoke with are generally aimed at

the 'hypocrisy' of the non-beef eating population, there are differences in conceptions of why dalit people eat beef, as well as the meanings they attach to eating beef.

Ambedkar has been of critical importance in framing the debate of the relation of food with untouchability. He argues that the origin of untouchability is not related either to race, or to the notions of pollution and purity. He puts forth a theory of the origin of untouchability with a theory of the connection between Buddhism, Hinduism and the food hierarchy<sup>24</sup>. He draws a historical account of the contestation for supremacy between the Hindus and the Buddhists. This contestation was framed in terms of the ethics of non-violence (and therefore, what one could consume as food). Ambedkar argues that even though the Hindus felt contempt for the Buddhists in general, it was because the broken people (dalit communities) continued to eat beef, that this hatred resulted in the practice of untouchability (Ambedkar, 1948a)<sup>25</sup>. The space that Ambedkar allows for, with this discourse, is one of a contestation of the ethic of vegetarianism as an expression of non-violence and the disruption of beef-eating as belonging to dalit communities.

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<sup>24</sup> This is his theory of 'broken men', who were people who had broken away from alien tribes and who were employed to protect tribesmen. The tribesmen were Hindus and the broken men were Buddhist.

<sup>25</sup> This theory forms the basis of the critique of the food hierarchy and sacredness of the cow amongst many dalit theoreticians and activists. MC Raj (2001, 204-208) for instance enunciates on the history of beef-eating among brahmin communities, thereby suggesting that the veneration of the cow is an innovation of dominant caste communities to establish their superiority. Kancha Iliah has famously denounced the cow as sacred and useful. He has instead argued for worshipping the 'more useful' buffalo (public meeting on the UN Conference against Racism and Xenophobia, August, 2001).



The hypocrisy of the food hierarchy is a recurrent theme amongst many of the people I spoke with. Ganganna articulates it in the following way, when talking about dominant caste people:

They say they do not eat raw meat, but when it comes to milk, they drink that. It comes from the same part, they drink that, don't they; if you drink that, it is pure, but if you eat meat, it's wrong. That is why in this society, no matter however much they study, however big they are, in villages and other places, however much they know, they are not ready to understand this. They might be engineers, in good jobs, officials, they might be *brahmins*, *gowdas*, *lingayats*, anyone, but, they think that "that person is a *holeya*, *madiga*, should not brush against them", don't know why. (Ganganna, interview)

In spite of Ganganna's incomprehension of the reasons for the practice of untouchability against *holeya-madiga* people, as against Muslim and Christian people<sup>26</sup>, he sees food relations as informing caste relations as well as the practice of untouchability. Ganganna sees food practices in terms of a cultural-valuational differentiation: a difference that causes an injury of misrecognition. He resists this mis-recognition by arguing against the hypocrisy of the vegetarian, non-beef eating ethic. There is nothing wrong with eating beef. What is wrong is the taboo surrounding it. Can this be read as a transformative recognition? One that questions the bases of the food hierarchy?

Narsamma and Lakshamma of the KDWM, argue that beef-eating is the primary reason for the discrimination that they face. However, they echo Ganganna's sentiment about the hypocrisy of the non-beef eating community. As Lakshamma put it:

All jatis want milk, curd, buttermilk. But why the mockery for eating meat? Milk, curd, buttermilk, butter, all people use that. But eating meat, so many people isolate that. I have heard this so many times. When I had a fight with Mudanath's wife, it was this that I debated. They jeer and say, "in this colony, beef-eaters, beef-eaters"; "we should

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<sup>26</sup> see previous section

stop this one thing”, someone said to her and I said, “who dared say that”? (interview, Karianapalaya slum)

But the taboos are not easy to deal with. There was a lot of discussion amongst the women about who still eats beef and who has discontinued with eating beef. As Eshwaramma shared, ‘so many people might be eating in secrecy’. There was a sense amongst some of the women that vegetarianism was a better way of life. The connections with transforming perceptions of themselves as ‘low’ were sought to be made in terms of food practices as well. When Narsamma talked about ‘discrimination’, she also articulated ways in which she *could not* be discriminated against anymore:

In those times, there was a lot of differentiation. In these times, it has reduced so much, in fact it has reduced completely. Now, we are not lower than them. It is the same with cleanliness or anything else. We are as clean as they are. We are not dirty. Meat is an occasional meal. In fact, in our house, we don’t eat at all. (interview, Karianapalya slum)

In Narsamma’s account, there is an analysis of caste based discrimination as stemming from dalit communities being perceived as dirty and eating *meat*. So, the *difference* between the communities, one that is the cause of the injustice of recognition, is remedied by taking on the ethics of vegetarianism and cleanliness and by questioning the understanding that these practices do not *belong* to dalit communities. By claiming the practices of vegetarianism and ‘cleanliness’ as her own, she articulates a different politics of recognition, one that distances *madiga* communities from meat-eating and ‘un-cleanliness’. However, this is not a straightforward move because she also criticises the hypocrisy of the food hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> ‘You drink milk from the cow, don’t you? You eat ghee, curd...if you eat meat, what happens? That is the reason they jeer. It comes from the same source, doesn’t it? And yet people differentiate’ (Narsamma, interview, Karianapalya slum).



A defiant Lakshamma, however, was more than willing to embrace the practice of eating beef:

I eat *amma*, when we come to fights, they say, “beef-eaters”, “why”, I say. “It has come to us. You have money, you pay 150 rupees and eat that, we don’t have money, we eat this”... that is how I understand it. I don’t know about other people. It is because of that that people differentiate. (interview, Karianapalaya slum)

Lakshamma’s response to Narsamma is poignant. She broadens the question of the cultural meanings of food practices to one of the economic conditions of *madiga* communities that produce the practice of beef-eating. There is also a defiance in terms of a politics of recognition. If the economic conditions of *madiga* people produce the cultural differentiation, then why not affirm the difference? ‘I eat once a week, my daughters eat, everyone, all my relatives eat beef’ (conversation at Karianapalya slum).

At this early stage, I would like to suggest that there is a recognition-redistribution dilemma in relation to the food practices of dalit communities, in the context of its meanings for caste relations. This is related to where we place the politics of transformation. Is it food practices that have to be transformed, or the meanings of food practices or caste relations itself? For instance, if the meanings of beef-eating were transformed, would it be acceptable to associate beef-eating with dalit communities? Ganganna’s method of remedying the misrecognition is to transform the meanings of beef-eating, by suggesting that there is no difference between eating beef and drinking milk. Lakshamma on the other hand, talks of the economic roots of the practice. However, she also follows Ganganna in questioning the hypocrisy of the food hierarchy. What none of them does, is to question the ethic of the sacredness of the cow. Does it work as a transformative strategy to equate the drinking of milk

with eating beef? Does this attack the moral ethic of non-violence that forms a powerful symbolic tool of vegetarian caste communities?

What jars in the previous accounts is Narsamma's response, even though the reasons for the differentiation, it seems, no longer exist in her particular case. While she criticises the hypocrisy of the food hierarchy, she herself has changed her consumption patterns. Another account that jars is one which is the sub-text of Lakshamma's analysis: *if we had the money, maybe we would not eat beef*. Do these accounts jar because they suggest that *it is food practices that have to be transformed*? Does this mean, therefore, that food practices can only be understood in relation to identity politics, i.e. in terms of *culture*, and therefore that the only framework of justice within the food hierarchy is a politics of recognition, in which the only just claim is a recognition of difference (affirmative recognition)? I will return to these issues once I examine in more detail what 'difference' claims entail.

### *DMC: A Celebration of Difference?*

There is no sense of a 'group' stance on food practices amongst the members of the DMC. However, what links the understandings are modes of analysing caste relations itself. So in this part, I will pick through different strands of understandings amongst members of the DMC, whilst linking these views with DMC's political trajectory of *dalit* to *kula-samudaya* (see Chapter 4).

DMC's politics of inversion, in relation to untouchability, dictates against constructing a relationship between food practices and untouchability. Yashoda of



DMC disconnects untouchability from food practices and talks of food practices on their own terms:

Your life/existence and mine, we might eat varied food, that's different, but you have a stomach, so do I, your hunger is the same as mine, the hunger is the same. The food is different, we only need to look for the reasons why the situations in which we eat food are different, that's all. Why I eat the kind of food I do is because my situation, my environs is such. Also, my economic situation is such. It is within the limits of our situation that we can eat. (interview, DMC office)

Yashoda's understanding of food practices is similar to Lakshamma's (of the KDWM). She suggests that the economic conditions, the environs of dalit communities, determine their food practices. However, while Lakshamma makes the connections to food practices and the discrimination that dalit communities endure, Yashoda's political leanings do not allow her to do so. This is because, for the DMC, to admit to the practice of 'untouchability' is to partake in a disempowering discourse. I want to suggest that this is because of their investment in the notion of *kula-samudaya* (caste community). To see communities as set in a hierarchy is to disempower themselves as dalit people. Therefore, a respect for difference, which sometimes translates into a *celebration of difference*, is a fundamental ethic of DMC's politics. This is why, in spite of Yashoda's reference to the economic situation of dalit people that produce a *difference*, the underlying tone is one of an affirmative politics of recognition.

Talking about the changes within the dalit community in relation to food practices,

Sudha of the DMC says:

Before they used to eat a lot of beef. Because of this feeling that it is lowly, some people have stopped. They have stopped because of this imposition of disgust. (interview, DMC)

Yashoda elaborates on those people:

Those are the people who have “advanced” in the education sphere, in positions of authority who hold high posts, those 5% are the only ones who are mimicking the brahmin ideals. The other 60% are living ordinary community life, with community values, with community roots. It is the people who are influenced by brahminism and modernisation, only them. (interview, DMC office)

This valorisation of community and, as I shall show, specifically *dalit* community, means that *any* change within dalit communities cannot escape the derogatory brackets of *brahminism* and modernisation<sup>28</sup>. In this instance, the prohibition of change is self-imposed, and respect of self and community have to conform to an indelible definition of identity.

Sudha’s emphatic ‘it is important that people who have left eating beef rethink their positions’ (interview, DMC office), is rooted in the valorisation of dalit community identity, of which beef-eating is/becomes an integral aspect. This position does not easily allow dalit people to turn vegetarian for, if they do so, they are open to the charge of being middle class, modern, inauthentic dalits. The need for respecting ‘one’s own culture’, coming as it does from histories of erasures and denials, can then translate into a deep unwillingness to allow for the diversity of what constitutes a dynamic dalit culture<sup>29</sup>. This valorisation of a particular understanding of dalit communities is a dangerous move, not just in terms of out-casting people who do not conform, but also because it blinkers the differences within dalit communities. Sudha argues:

If a *vadda* eats rat meat, they eat according to their means, if a *madiga* eats beef, there is no sense of *asayathe*, disgust. There is no sense of disgust between the communities. This notion of disgust is imposed from the upper caste communities. That something is dirty, low has come from them. It has come from the outside and has been applied here, it has not been created here. (interview, DMC office)

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<sup>28</sup> This seems akin to the *sanskritisation* arguments of MN Srinivas (1962, 1966) where he suggests that lower caste communities mimic the practices of ‘dominant’ caste communities, in a bid to increase their caste status.

<sup>29</sup> I will examine this in detail when I look at dalit culture and its relation to feminism (see Chapter 5, Part 2).



The valorisation of dalit community identity as egalitarian means that Sudha can make an unequivocal statement that, 'there is no sense of disgust *between* the communities'. However, while the food hierarchy might suggest that down the beef-eating order there would be no oppressive practices in terms of eating in one another's houses (*madiga* and *holeya* communities), this is not how it obtains. There are contradictions to be pointed out because, in many instances, *holeya* people do not eat in *madiga* homes<sup>30</sup>. The ethic of valorisation of dalit community identity hinders the DMC from having a far more incisive group political discourse on the food hierarchy.

However, there is a radical potential in DMC's methodology of a politics of inversion. For instance, people at the DMC talk of the eating of rats by the *vadda* community<sup>31</sup> in a confrontational manner. Beef-eating as a taboo is fairly widely understood; it makes dalit people 'immoral' and 'inhumane', but rat-eating makes them a spectacle. In this instance, DMC makes people confront their perceptions of the 'other', by presenting themselves in that very image. By talking about rat-eating, DMC is changing the terms of the food hierarchy. The moral ethic of vegetarianism and the ethic against beef-eating, are placed in the context of economic and cultural conditions that produce the food hierarchy. By placing the rat in the food hierarchy, the DMC, I would argue, defiantly demeans the wider squabble about what is good or bad food.

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<sup>30</sup> This is where the diversity in DMC's political make-up is visible. Their understanding of caste relations as 'process' means that some of them are willing to define caste relations in terms of how practices obtain from their perspectives. Jayaram, a *holeya*, talked about the taboo in his house against eating in *madiga* peoples' houses (conversation, DMC office)

## *Cultural Difference and Social Justice in the Food Hierarchy*

In this part, I want to ask the question about whether, and if so how, we can reconnect the problematic of cultural difference with the problematic of social equality, in relation to food practices amongst caste communities. One of the dubious modes of transformation of the food hierarchy and caste relations, it seems, is suggesting that *it is food practices that have to change*. Therefore, it is dubious, for instance, to suggest that the mode of disassociating dalit communities from the disability incurred by eating beef, would be by not eating beef anymore. On the other hand, it seems legitimate to suggest that the cultural meanings of food practices are what have to be transformed. More specifically, it is the stigma attached to beef-eating that has to be transformed. This means an engagement with a politics of recognition. A politics of recognition, however, has to contend with the idea of vegetarianism as superior, because of its avowed connections with an ethic of non-violence, as well as the sacredness of the cow and its usefulness in the agrarian economy.

Some of the dalit individuals that I engaged with resisted the superiority of vegetarianism as an ethic, by arguing that milk and beef come from the same part, and that it was hypocrisy to consume one and not the other. Surely the surplus of bulls and bull calves produced as beef (Damodaran, 2003) was also part of the bounty of the holy cow. I would suggest that while this strategy reveals the hypocrisy of the non beef-eating population (as does revealing the consumption of leather products by the non beef-eating populations), it does not necessarily address all of the reasons for the ‘superiority’ of the ethic of vegetarianism or that of non beef-

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<sup>31</sup> conversation with Chenappa in DMC office. Also see Sudha’s account, above.



eating meat eaters. To do that means asking questions about the graded valuation of living things.

Though the groups I engaged with proffer an oblique critique of the ethic of the sacredness of the cow (which is one of the crucial ways of addressing the non beef-eating population, whether vegetarian or not), I want to bring out ways in which it has been challenged. As I have mentioned earlier, Kancha Iliah (2002)<sup>32</sup> has famously denounced the sacredness of the cow by positing the buffalo as far more useful, 'let us worship the buffalo'. His argument is that buffalo milk serves about 75% of the population in India, and therefore is far more useful. Though at first this may seem trivial and absurd, especially when he suggests that the cow is worshipped because it is white, as against the black buffalo, what Kancha Iliah does, is to bring the basis of the 'sacredness of the cow' as an ethical principle under sharp scrutiny, by satirising the economic argument of the cow as the heart of the agrarian economy.

MC Raj, a fiery dalit activist from Tumkur in Karnataka, within his own idiom, also takes on the principle of the sacredness of the cow. He does this by usurping the terms of the accepted 'use' of the 'sacred' cow. 'Glory to the cow, the bull and the buffalo that give us such rich food at a low cost', he says (2001: 205). The taboos against *eating* something so sacred are inverted when he suggests that the cow is glorious *because it can be consumed at such low cost*.

Flowing from the understandings that there is nothing *wrong* with beef-eating, is a celebration of beef-eating as a cultural *difference* to be affirmed and even celebrated.

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<sup>32</sup> Meeting held prior to UN Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and other Related Discrimination, August 2002, Town hall, Bangalore, hereinafter cited as Kancha Iliah (2002)

However, none of these strategies quite tackle the ethic of non-violence of vegetarianism. The ethic of non-violence, in relation to consuming food, gets its credence from an understanding of *necessity*, and a graded valuation of living things. Disputing the sacredness of the cow disrupts the graded hierarchy of living things, but not necessarily the ethic of non-violence.

When DMC injects the 'rat' into this scheme, they disrupt this neat equation between necessity and what living thing is 'proper' to be *consumed as food*. I want to suggest that the language of the economic conditions that produces the food hierarchy is *also* integral to any resistance to the hierarchy. Poverty, inability to access other food resources are, I suggest, integral to resisting the food hierarchy. This is the reason why the economic conditions of food relations find expression in so many of the accounts. When the meaning of necessity is contested, '*but you have a stomach, so do I, your hunger is the same as mine, the hunger is the same...[but] it is within the limits of our situation that we can eat*' (Yashoda, DMC), the moral ethic that produces insatiable bodies is rendered meaningless. Contrary to Gandhi's insatiable, greedy bodies, the context of the economic conditions of dalit people, allows the space to examine the meaning of 'necessity'. This is not to say at all that dalit people would not or should not eat beef or rat meat if they were wealthier<sup>33</sup>, but rather that the language of the economic conditions of people disrupts the ways in which *necessity itself is understood*. Hunger and the socio-economic context of hunger,

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<sup>33</sup> Nor is it to say that the dominant caste non beef-eating community is excused, within the terms of their own ethics, from the fact that other people are required to eat beef. In no agrarian economy can one countenance a situation where all cattle, male or female, productive or unproductive, were allowed to live and consume fodder.



allows the space to ask important questions of whether dalit communities have access to other basic food resources such as paddy, and if not why not<sup>34</sup>.

The tension with 'resolving' the question of food practices and caste identity also occurs because food is not the single marker of caste identity. In the next part, I will examine the sexual division of labour within dalit communities. I will examine the work that dalit women do in the city and in their homes, as well as the meanings that are attributed to their work, and the ways in which these meanings are contested. Further I will examine the gendered nature of their relationships within dalit communities.

## Conclusion

In this part of the chapter, I have sought to bring out, through the discourses of the respondents, the several tensions in accounting for a dalit politics in the city of Bangalore. Using Fraser's analytical categories of culture and economics, along with her framework of justice, I have sought to understand the politics in relation to the naming of an injustice as untouchability. While the DMC attempt to deconstruct the meanings of untouchability through a radical refashioning of the sense of self, of both dalit communities and dominant caste communities, by shifting the associations of untouchability to the perpetrators of the violence, they also dissipate the power of this deconstructive strategy, by suggesting that they were instrumental in the evolution of the concept of 'untouchable', albeit a completely different one.

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<sup>34</sup> See the compelling short story Batta (Paddy) by Mogalli Ganesh (2002), where he argues that underlying the construction of the meanings of paddy are the assumptions of *who* is its legitimate consumer.

Apart from the politics of naming the violence of untouchability as such, I have also indicated that we have to account for a gendered analysis of it. While arguing that the specific sporadic surplus untouchability experienced by dalit women is related to the constructions of sexuality, I locate the ways in which untouchability is determined by caste relations. Although there seems to be an inability to articulate the nature of untouchability in the city in the first instance, the manifestations of untouchability *are* present. If we are to name particular instances of violence as untouchability, we have to engage with not only a politics of naming the violence as such, but also an understanding of caste relations in the space of the city. Further, there are two prominent ways in which untouchability has been understood by my respondents: food relations and relations of work.

With regard to the politics of food, I argue that there is a broad food hierarchy in India, at the heart of which is the principle of the sacredness of the cow and an understanding of a graded hierarchy of living things. Located in a climate of an increasing right-field of politics, with the introduction of bills banning the slaughter of cows, the violence of the food hierarchy for those who do not conform is very real. In such a context, I have located in the discourses of the respondents, strategies at disrupting this hierarchy.

The arguments of the respondents can be unravelled by using the analytical tools of culture and economics. While there have been attempts to disrupt the sacredness of the cow by questioning its centrality to the agrarian economy, there have also been several understandings amongst the respondents who seek to expose the hypocrisies of the non beef-eating population. The DMC attempts to disrupt the food hierarchy



using a deconstructive strategy which holds up the rat-eating amongst some dalit communities as a spectacle. Having said that, there are also others at the DMC who suggest that beef-eating ought to be respected, and that dalit people who have given up eating beef, ought to return to their ways. However, there are still others at the KDWM for instance, who argue that beef-eating does not belong to them anymore. Written into the strategies of opposing the food hierarchy, are understandings of food in terms of necessity: in terms of the economic conditions that produce the cultural consumption of food. This argument, I suggest, strikes at the heart of the understanding of insatiable bodies that is central to the sacredness of the cow.

The politics of untouchability is not limited to the cultural and economic conditions that produce the food hierarchy. While I have indicated the ways in which the work that communities do is related to the violence of untouchability, in the next part of this chapter, I will interrogate this relationship in the context of domestic work in the city of Bangalore. Further, the politics of untouchability is also connected to the constructions of sexuality of women. I will unravel the meanings of menstruation amongst the DMC to locate the difficulties in accounting for a gendered understanding of untouchability for *dalit* women. The conditions of dalit women's lives are moreover structured by the sexual division of labour within dalit communities. By locating the conditions of dalit women's lives in the city, I will examine the burdens that dalit women shoulder. These are the issues that I turn to in the next part of this chapter.

## **Chapter 5 (Part 2)**

# **Uncovering Injustice: Toward an Integrated Theory of Caste, Class and Gender**

### **Introduction**

In the last part of this chapter, I examined the ways in which the dalit groups that I met engaged with the politics of untouchability, as well as with the food hierarchy in Bangalore. In this part, I shall elaborate on the politics of untouchability in specific relation to dalit women, through an analysis of the work that they do in the city, the meanings of the work, and the strategies for transformation. I also locate the tensions in accounting for the untouchability practised within dalit communities against dalit women by unravelling the meanings of menstruation. Further, I will elaborate on the sexual division of labour amongst dalit communities by locating the responsibilities that dalit women shoulder and the strategies for transformation. I argue that the responsibilities that women shoulder are related to particular constructions of heterosexuality, which I interrogate in the particular discourses of the DMC.

I start with an elaboration of Fraser's framework, in order to locate the division of labour between caste communities and the sexual division of labour within dalit communities. If we were to analyse the gendered aspects of work, in terms of the categories of culture and economics, we could make the following propositions: there is a gendered division of labour in the economy, in terms of paid and unpaid work, and the cultural meanings of this gendered division of labour are based on an



understanding of a construction of 'womanhood', and what *women are meant to do*. Women are expected to cook, clean and look after children, because of the cultural construction of women's and men's work. Further, the paid work that women do is also gendered, in terms of the types of work that women (are meant to) do.

If we were to analyse work in terms of caste relations, using the analytical category of economics, we have the proposition of a division of labour amongst caste communities. In terms of understanding work using the analytical category of culture, we have the proposition that there is a cultural construction of 'dalithood', and what dalit people are meant to do. However, do these analytical distinctions make sense in the context of the city?<sup>1</sup> Do these propositions follow for dalit women in Bangalore? I start with an analysis of the paid work that dalit women do in the city.

## **Servicing the City**

Vijayanagara, Malleshwara, Sadashivanagara, Majestic: all these are middle class areas. In all of these areas, to do domestic work, to do their work, there are dalit areas. For example Vijayanagara, there is Mekekaval, for Jayanagar, Hanumanthayya's relatives' area, for Malleshawaram, Okkalipuram slum, for Majestic, Srirampuram slum...then, for Sadashivanagar, Vayalikaval slum. Caste is serving every metropolitan area in Bangalore even today. That is how one may see the operation of caste in cities as well. All domestic workers, working at houses, 99% of them are dalits. Caste has not been broken by the city. (Parthasarathy, MRHS, interview)

Without surveys on the caste and gendered profiles of work in the city, it is difficult to make any categorical statement on the work that dalit women do in urban spaces such as Bangalore. Whilst there have been reports that dalit women do refuse-removal work across India (Thaekakara, 1999) and that dalit women and girls work as 'prostitutes' in India (Rozario, 2000), these reports are not limited to particular

urban spaces. However, there is a general perception held that dalit women who live in the slums of Bangalore work in the *agarbathi* (incense stick) industry, in *beedi* rolling, domestic work, cleaning the streets, tailoring, and working in factories: shoe factories, box factories and garment factories.<sup>2</sup>

Keshavmurthy, General Secretary of the Bangalore Mahanagara Guttuge Pourakarmika Sangha - Organisation for the Contract Street Cleaners of the City of Bangalore (also member of the MRHS), suggests that of the 6000 contract cleaning workers<sup>3</sup> working to keep the city clean, 87.5% of them are women, 70% of them are from the *madiga* community, 20% Tamilians from the *pariayan* and *chattiayan* communities, about 5% from the *kuruba* community; and the rest are made up of an amalgamation of castes such as the *gowdas*. Keshavmurthy adds that there is only one *brahmin* man who works as a contract labourer, and 'his status is maintained by the administrators' (Keshavmurthy, interview, Samvada office). Therefore, 95% of contract street cleaners are dalit and 87.5% are women.<sup>4</sup>

Further, Keshavmurthy suggests that the nature of the work is highly gendered: while the women clean and sweep the streets, the men collect the garbage, load lorries and

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapters 1 and 3

<sup>2</sup> Conversations with Selva Issac, Suresha and Balamma (Slum Jagathu), Ganganna, Keshavmurthy and Parthasarathy (MRHS), Geeta Menon (SJS) and Muddappa, Muttappa (DISC).

<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, the Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) took the plea that the task of keeping the city clean was too enormous for it to do on its own. Thereafter, there has been a gradual contracting out of the work of cleaning the city (Support Group for Contract Pourakarmikas, 2002). Keshavmurthy suggests that out of a 100 wards into which Bangalore city is divided, 86 wards have been contracted out. These wards are still further divided into divisions and in each division, 45 members are employed: 40 women and 5 men. The Bangalore Mahanagara Guttuge Pourakarmika Sangha -Organisation for the Contract Street Cleaners of the City of Bangalore was formed around 1996, as a consequence of the BMP subcontracting the work of keeping the city clean to contractors, who then employ the contract street cleaners (Keshavmurthy, interview).

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting (though not necessarily gendered) understanding of the work of 'pourakarmikas', see Prashad (2000). Also see Support Group for Guttuge Pourakarmikas for a report on the conditions and demands of the contract street cleaners in Bangalore city (2002).



do lifting work (interview, Samvada office; also see Support Group for Contract Pourakarmikas, 2002: 14). In the instance of the contract street cleaners in Bangalore, we can make categorical statements that the work itself is gendered, in terms of the differences between the work that women and men do. Further, it is an industry that is both predominantly caste-based as well as gendered, in terms of *who* does the work of cleaning the streets. Still further, most of the contract street cleaners live in the slums of Bangalore (2002: 19).

As I have mentioned in Chapter 2, most of the dalit women that I have interacted with were domestic workers, affiliated with the Karnataka Domestic Workers' Movement (KDWM). Specifically, all 20-25 of the domestic workers that I met were *madiga* or dalit *christian* women, living in the slums of Doddkunte and Karianapalya. The 8-10 women working as domestic workers, who were part of the Stree Jagruti Samithi, living in Urs colony and Ragiguda slums, were from the *vadda*, *adi-Karnataka (madiga)* and Muslim communities. Sr. Celia of the KDWM suggests that most of the women involved in domestic work are 'dalit' women, though she is unsure about exactly which communities they belong to (interview, KDWM office). However, the majority of domestic women workers that I met were *madiga* or dalit Christian.

Having said that, it is very difficult to assess, especially given its unorganised nature, either the numbers of domestic workers in Bangalore or the communities that they belong to. The estimates however, are that there are about 500,000 domestic workers in Bangalore, 25% of whom are girls between 10-16 years (Kumar, Melanie: 2002)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> A study of the conditions of domestic workers in the world by Social Alert, suggests that there are 20 million women, men and children in domestic work in India. Of these 92% are women, girls and

In a recent study conducted by Women's Voice and the Bangalore Gruha Karmikara Sangha which covered close to 1000 women domestic workers in 12 slums across the city, it was estimated that over 89% belonged to the Scheduled Caste communities (Balakrishnan, 2004). It is also important to note that domestic work is a highly gendered field of work, especially in the urban areas in India (Sharma, Kalpana, 2003; Srinivas, L, 1995)<sup>6</sup>.

In the next few sections, I shall analyse the conditions and nature of domestic work, the meanings that are attributed to it and transformative strategies, both in terms of caste (and class), as well as in terms of gender. Central to this analysis is Fraser's framework of locating primary harm, as well as her matrix of recognition, redistribution, transformation and affirmation.

### ***Paid Domestic Work: Unravelling the Injustice***

Domestic work in Karnataka is not yet recognised as work by the law. There is however, an attempt to regulate the conditions of domestic work by the Karnataka State Unorganised Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Bill, which has been introduced in the legislative council, but is pending comments and recommendations by the house committee headed by the labour minister (Deccan Herald, May 2, 2003)<sup>7</sup>. This has meant that there are/have been no

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children, 20% are under 14 years of age and 25% are between the ages of 15-20. In Bombay for instance, it is estimated that there are around 600,000 (500,000 part time workers and 90,000 full time workers), 90% of whom are women and children. (Sharma, Kalpana, 2003)

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting analysis of male domestic workers in the city of Delhi, see Chopra (2003) where she argues that the feminine humour and ethic of care associated with domestic work provides an insight into the possibilities for a transformation of gendered politics through an evocation of pro-feminist men.

<sup>7</sup> The Central Govt is also seeking to regulate the conditions of the unorganised sector with their proposed Unorganised Sector Workers' Bill, 2003. It was due to be presented in parliament in the winter session last year (see [www.labourfile.org/labourfile](http://www.labourfile.org/labourfile), no date; and [www.thehindubusinessline.com](http://www.thehindubusinessline.com), no date). However, it seems that there was a recent move by both the state and central



regulations with regard to the conditions and nature of work, minimum wages, holidays, bonus, security of employment, pension benefits, disability benefits, maternity benefits, insurance, etc for domestic workers in Karnataka.

All the terms of conditions of employment therefore, amongst the women that I met were ad hoc, verbal contracts, constantly open to revocation. Many of the women worked on average in two houses everyday, most times Sundays included, for 2-3 hours in each house. The average pay per month from each house was about Rs.300 per month<sup>8</sup>. Even at a conservative estimate, the rate of pay was at an appalling Rs.5/- per hour; many times, they worked for less. There were no weekly holidays in many cases, though some of them had negotiated a day off. There were no specific days stipulated as holidays. They did not have paid sick leave, or the option to take leave in any other event and had to rely on the generosity of their employers in the events of festivals, illness, births or deaths (focus group discussion on paid domestic work, KDWM office).

The women were responsible, upon negotiation with the employers, for cleaning the house (sweeping, mopping and dusting), washing utensils and clothes, and cooking in some instances. The added responsibilities were gendered household chores, such as shopping for vegetables, caring for children, the aged, disabled etc.<sup>9</sup> Though most of the women said that they worked for an average of 2-3 hours in one house, the agreement was more in terms of the jobs that had to be completed. Therefore, there was a never-ending flow of clothes and utensils. Further, the only equipment

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governments to exclude the domestic workers from the ambit of the bills (Deccan Herald, January 13, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> The report by Women's Voice and the Bangalore Gruha Karmikara Sangha suggests that a majority of the 1000 women covered by the study earn less than Rs.500 per month (Balakrishnan, 2004).

available in most of the houses was a broom and a cloth for a mop. This meant that they had to bend and crouch to sweep and mop the floor. And when washing utensils, they had to stand in water for all the time that they worked. Many of them complained of back pains, leg pains, colds, and fatigue and they often suffered verbal abuse from their employers<sup>10</sup> (focus group discussion on paid domestic work, KDWM office).

To begin to comprehend the conditions of employment of the women, we have to comprehend the social and economic conditions in which they lived. All the women domestic workers that I spoke with were in debt, either through chit funds, or personal loans with the local money lenders, who charged exorbitant rates of interest. There were stories of economic scandals, with people who organised the chit fund absconding with the money that all of them had collected together (conversations in Karianpalya slum). The demands on the money that the household earned were enormous. For a start, many of them paid rents ranging between Rs.300-500 per month which was nearly half or two-thirds of what the women earned (focus group discussion on work, KDWM office).

The economic conditions of dalit communities living in the slums of Bangalore, and the constraints on living in the city, are linked to the reasons for dalit women doing domestic work in the city. This is highlighted by Lakshamma when asked how she came to do domestic work:

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<sup>9</sup> See Ossanha, Pflug, Saldanha (no date)

<sup>10</sup> There were constant reports in the papers about the incredible physical abuse that domestic workers endured. However, I was not privy to any instance of physical or sexual violence against the women domestic workers (who were my respondents) by their employers. Having said that, there was one incredibly horrifying story where a young girl of about 16, who was given shelter by Sr. Celia of the KDWM, had suffered violent physical abuse by her employer, where he would hit and even bite her.



Before, what we would do: eat, look after the children and sleep. Now that the children have grown up...for all the children, fees, light bill, for people coming and going, (Narsamma: If he had a government job, we could manage) if we got Rs.5000-10000 (per month), we could manage, but on coolie of Rs.60-70 [for a day]... on, 60-70 rupees, what life can we live, how are we to look after our children, how do we educate them, how do we pay their fees, the light bill? Barring water, no, we have to pay for water as well...everything you have to buy to eat. On this wage, what are we to do? (interview, Karianpalya slum)

To begin to unravel the economic conditions of dalit communities using Fraser's categories, the injustice of maldistribution is indeed severe. It is an injustice rooted in an economic order that does not provide for the basic needs of its citizens. There is no mechanism of social security to provide for the needs of dalit communities. When Lakshamma says that if they got Rs.5000-10000 per month she would manage, she expresses her frustration at an economic order that does not allow for her needs to be met with the wages that are earned. However, while Lakshamma attributes it to the situation of her community, Narsamma's reading of the situation, 'if he had a government job, we could manage' can be understood in a number of ways.

One of the ways this can be understood is by recognising the mal-distribution of 'government jobs' within her community. It is because her community, specifically the men, suffers from the injustice of maldistribution of jobs that the women are forced to work as domestic workers. Inherent to this understanding is the notion that it is the man's responsibility to cater to his family's needs. This emasculation of the dalit male for his incapacity to provide for the family is made more explicit when she asks, 'if he was earning properly, tell me, would I be doing this work?' (focus group discussion on work)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> See Anandhi, Jeyranjan and Krishnan (2002) who examine questions of caste, class and gender from the perspective of the changing norms and practices of masculinity in the context of a local economy in a village in Tamil Nadu.

Therefore, while Narsamma identifies that the injustice lies in the mal-distribution of government jobs, this statement is also loaded with the perceived stability of government jobs, the *value* of the work that she does, as well as what she expects women and men to do. Therefore, she locates the remedy for the injustice, not in breaking the bastions to the paid work that *women* do, but in breaking them for *dalit men*. If the men had jobs that were more stable in terms of wages, security of employment, pensions, etc, this would translate into stability for the household. Further, domestic work is not something she has chosen to do, it is something that she is forced to do because of the constraints of her situation. The gendered nature of the work she does, or the purported value of the work she does, are not necessarily contested. What she and other women do contest, is an association of domestic work as intrinsic to their communities:

Narsamma: We are not people who have gone out to work. We are not people who have done domestic work. In our towns/villages as well. We might have done odd jobs here and there...harvesting work,...we have done that. But we did not understand what difficulty was. Now, being married, having children, caught in this family life, for that child something, for this child, something else, the wages are not enough. That is why, only after coming to Bangalore, I have learnt domestic work. (Lakshamma: same with me) Before that I did not know what domestic work meant.

Question: In the villages, no one goes for domestic work?

Narsamma and Lakshamma: No.

Narsamma: In our area, nobody did that.

Lakshamma: If they are poor, they (the rich) have fields, they do their work ...like that.

Narsamma: If I am to tell you, I have started domestic work only in the past five years. After marriage, I never went. All of us. Even after I got here, I did not go. It is only now, (Eshwamma: Because of difficulties at home) because the children are growing up, there are difficulties. We did not go for any work...Earlier, we used to do our own house work. It is only after coming to Bangalore, coming here that... (interview, Karianpalya slum)

To reiterate, there are several moves that the women at KDWM make. Working *outside* the house is not necessarily something they value. If they could have their way, if they did not face so many constraints, if there was not such acute mal-



distribution, then they would not *choose* to work outside the house. Further, the women dissociate themselves from domestic work. It is not work that is traditional to their communities. If they have worked outside the house, they argue, it has been in the fields. The underlying reading is that while field work, in other people's fields, is also a sign of poverty and hardship, such work has more *value* than the work that they do now.

These arguments find resonance in Vijay Prashad's study of the social history of the *balmiki* community in Delhi who work as sweepers for the Delhi Municipality. He argues that the *chuhra* community (who form the *balmiki* community now), were involved in various other occupations before some of them migrated to Delhi where they were *constructed* as a community of sweepers<sup>12</sup>. He argues therefore that the ascriptive nature of the work of cleaning, as *belonging* to certain communities has to be historicised. Still further, Prashad argues that amongst the *balmiki* community, 'the historical narrative of their oppression reveals that there is little sense of being inherently menial, since their condition is historical and can therefore be overcome' (2000: 27).

Narsamma, Lakshamma and Eshwaramma therefore point to two things: one is the injustice of mal-distribution amongst their communities living in the slums of Bangalore, which compels them to work outside their homes, and the other is to the injustice of mis-recognition that they suffer, because they belong to a certain community; a mis-recognition that they are *meant* to do domestic work. However,

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<sup>12</sup> 'Most of them [the chuhra] were expert reapers and winnowers, makers of the winnowing pan and cart covers, magicians, potters, midwives, musicians (particularly at weddings, funerals, dances and festivals), village messengers (during betrothals) and, general labourers on the fields. In their everyday lives, few Chuhra worked as sweepers. (Prashad, 2000: 26)

while distancing themselves from domestic work, as I have mentioned earlier, they are not necessarily contesting the *value* of the work that they do. They are contesting their permanent association with that work. When there is ‘a never-ending flow of utensils and clothes’, it seems as if the employers expect the women to do the work *because that is what they (are meant to) do*.

The stories about the symbolic re-washing of utensils by employers, the serving of food in different cups and plates and the offering of *tangala* food (food kept overnight) attest to the symbolic violence inflicted on domestic workers (focus group discussion on domestic work, KDWM office, interview with Sr. Celia, KDWM office)<sup>13</sup>. The fact that the women who *clean* the house *are not clean enough* could be read as the underlying sentiment of such violence against the women. It is also an understanding that the work is dirty, that drives the employers to inflict such violence on the women. The understanding of the work as unworthy is echoed by Narsamma’s employer when she asks her for a raise. She tells her:

Is it a government job? We have to give you a raise in salary from time to time? Is this the government, you think? (Narsamma, conversation, Karianpalya slum)

Narsamma’s employer alludes to two things when she tells her that she cannot give her a raise, both of which imply that domestic work *has no value*. One is that there are no rules, legally or socially, for domestic workers. Further, she probably alludes to her own inability to pay: while the government can afford to pay its employees, she cannot. What this means, however, is that the domestic worker bears the economic costs of society. Her employer cannot/ will not pay, and if she does, it is a

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<sup>13</sup> Keshavmurthy speaks of this violence against *pourakarmika* women as well. He says, ‘If I am to talk about the (harassment of) *pourakarmikas*, in a mug meant for the toilet, they bring water, for our people’ (interview, Samvada office). Also see the recent report by Women’s Voice and the



mark of her generosity. Domestic workers are not *workers*, entitled to norms of pay or bonuses or holidays. They should be grateful that they are employed at all<sup>14</sup>. Does this then call for a remedy of recognising *domestic work as work*?

The employers of domestic labour show little respect for the work of domestic labour. The women who do this work echo this negative valuation in so far as they distance themselves from it, naming it as work that they only undertake through necessity. However, the understanding of domestic work as valueless is not endorsed across the board, by all the women. While there is a sense that it is not work that they would prefer to do, underlying the indispensability of their services is an understanding that the employers cannot manage without them. This is especially so when they do chores apart from sweeping and swabbing, cleaning clothes and utensils. Lakshamma for instance worked as the cleaner and the cook in a school run for disabled children. She often articulated her indispensability in the school, 'how would they manage?' as well as her own compassion for the students.

So far I have identified several issues that face the domestic workers' movement.

The women identify the injustice of maldistribution as a defining feature of their

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GruhaKarmikara Sangha that has documented the symbolic violence perpetrated against dalit women domestic workers (Deccan Herald, January 17, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Once when I was in Sr. Celia's office, interviewing her, the interview was interrupted by a person aggrieved by the action Sr. Celia had taken about domestic child labour being practised down the road from the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement office. He was very aggressive and wanted to know her credentials. What was interesting about the argument that ensued was the way in which both sides played with the notion of responsibility. He suggested that he was doing the girl a favour by providing her with food and shelter. Where would she go otherwise? To Sr. Celia's credit, she said that the movement was willing to take the responsibility of the child. She was unequivocal in her condemnation of the practice, no apologies made whatsoever. While this seemed dangerous, in political terms, having been on escapades with her before, and knowing that there was a paternalistic turn where she assumed that she knew what was best for them, in this context, at least she had a response to the paternalism of someone who was exploiting the girl. The incident is interesting

because of the issues of responsibility that it throws up that the state should be addressing, instead of leaving it to the benevolence of individuals.

lives. This maldistribution is understood in terms of the denial of access to resources, for instance government jobs, low wages, lack of holidays and bonuses etc., and the economic conditions of living in the city. In Narsamma's account, the maldistribution amongst dalit communities is connected to a gendered understanding of the roles of men and women. She does not necessarily contest the ingrained cultural assumptions of the gendered roles that they *should* perform. Therefore, the injustice is in not being *able* to perform it, not so much that it *should not* be performed. While the women do not necessarily subject the gendered understanding of domestic work to scrutiny, they rally against the misrecognition of domestic work as intrinsic to their communities. Again, the women have an ambivalent relationship with the value of the work they do: while they see themselves as indispensable to their employers, this indispensability is underscored by the perception that their work is not recognised as such by the employers.

### *Meanings of Paid Domestic Work and Transformative Strategies*

Lakshmi Srinivas, in her analysis of domestic work across cultures, has suggested that domestic work has been characterised by its low status, exemplified by its position only a little above 'prostitution' and begging in the occupational hierarchy.

Analysing this relegation of status, she suggests that it is because:

[Domestic work] is associated with women, does not call for any particular or identifiable skills, is considered drudgery [and] involves cleaning which is influenced by ideas of pollution and purity. (1995: 270)

Lakshmi Srinivas therefore places the injustice of misrecognition of domestic work in terms of its performance by women, the kind of work it entails, and its association with pollution and purity. One of the discursive underpinnings of the domestic workers movement, on the other hand, has been a critique of the injustice of



maldistribution, understood in terms of the exploitation of the workers, of which a re-valuation of the work that domestic workers do is an integral part.

Therefore, the strategies employed by the KDWM, *in theory, as a group*, are to seek redistribution as well as recognition, as workers in a particular type of employment. The women at KDWM, however, are ambivalent about the *value* of domestic work, while being more emphatic about questioning their association with domestic work. In such a context, I think it is important to pick through the various strategies employed, to examine whether there is a redistribution-recognition dilemma in the context of domestic workers in Bangalore city.

In her analysis of the master-servant relationship, Lakshmi Srinivas (1995) has pointed towards its origins in slavery and serfdom. The associations of domestic work and slavery continue to be made, because the language of slavery is an evocative mode with which the Domestic Workers Movement<sup>15</sup> combines the two simultaneous pulls in the ways in which it constructs the issues of domestic workers (Passanha et al, no date). One is the language of rights of workers; work contracts, just wages, increments, work hours, rest, leave, medical benefits, maternity benefits, pensions and bonuses are all part of this language of redistributive justice (Passanha, et al, no date: 20 and Sr. Celia, KDWM, interview). Recognising domestic work *as work* is intrinsic to this conception of redistributive justice.

The other is the injury of misrecognition, because underlying this whole framework of redistributive justice is an injustice that centres around the *dignity* of domestic

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<sup>15</sup> The Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement is the sister body of the larger Domestic Workers Movement.

work, as well as of domestic workers. Therefore, apart from the redistributive justice demands, Sr. Celia of the KDWM suggests that one of the foremost issues facing domestic workers is dignity:

[...] if they get their dignity, definitely they will demand their salary...since they think they are nobody...they can't afford to not work, they go for any salary...that is why I say it is not about income generation training...give the people their dignity...you give them training for dignity, they will demand their right. (Sr.Celia, interview, KDWM office)

The Domestic Workers Movement therefore argues that, apart from redistributive justice claims, it stands for an upholding of certain values. Firstly, 'all domestic work has dignity: it is an indirect participation in production, it contributes to the quality of life; [and secondly] the personal dignity of each domestic worker' (Passanha, et al, no date: 19). This the DWM hopes to achieve through a process of activist intervention that empowers domestic workers through leadership training and group solidarity; crisis intervention and counselling; helping in formal and non-formal education; providing a space and occasion to meet each other and networking with other domestic workers organisations and support groups (Passanha et al, no date: 20).

The use of the language of dignity in naming the misrecognition of domestic workers, can be read as a recognition of the work that domestic workers do, as women and as people from a particular caste/class. By constructing the work as *useful* and integral to the economy<sup>16</sup>, the DWM, as well as its sister body the KDWM, argue for a politics of recognition of the work that domestic workers do. That is the basis on which they argue for a differential valuational of the *people* that

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<sup>16</sup> This is quite like DMC's analysis of useful work. 'There is no question of thinking of the work as low'. (Yashoda, interview, DMC) see Chapter Four.



do the work; they are doing useful work, they should have dignity. This, supplemented with adequate wages, better working conditions and organisation would seemingly transform the conditions of domestic workers.

However, I want to bring out the many tensions that exist in articulating a politics of transformation. When asked whether it was due of the meanings of the work (as dirty) that there was discrimination against domestic workers, Sr. Celia said:

It is because from the very beginning, the nature of the work is considered as dirty work. Now you take an example, say in America, are they not doing such work, are they not cleaning their bathrooms? They come in the car, (I think, I don't know), they come in the car, they get some dignity. So, I think that once people are educated, they will stop this crap. I need work you know. If I work in the bathroom also, if people dignify me, I will go and do. That is why I am saying that education is the most important thing to change. If many children, all have learnt BA, BEd, they can equally apply for the jobs, you know. Other people also like teaching jobs, isn't it? (Sr. Celia, interview)

A transformative politics of recognition and redistribution has to deal with several issues: an understanding of certain types of work as *dirty*, a division of labour that sustains certain caste/class women doing such work and a cultural valuational principle that determines that cleaning is women's work. Does recognising the work that dalit working class women do as *useful*, transform the meanings of work as dirty? Does it transform the meanings of women's work? Does struggling for better wages, working conditions, etc. transform the division of labour in gendered and in caste/class terms?

Sr. Celia starts her account with the misrecognition of domestic work as dirty work. However, she also makes a departure from an understanding of domestic work as *useful* work. In her account, domestic work is considered *dirty* work and people do the work out of *necessity*. Therefore, in Sr. Celia's conception, it is not *necessary*,

*useful* work, but work *born out of necessity*. If people had a choice with education, if they were better paid, if they gave it dignity, maybe it would be worthwhile. People have to work to survive. But if given an option in an occupational hierarchy, would teaching not be better? Should dalit communities not have the options to teach as well? Therefore, the underlying argument that she makes is that articulating something as useful does not *address* the issue that it is done in dire need.

I would suggest that the differing pulls in the domestic worker's movement point to a stark recognition-redistribution dilemma between a transformative redistributive politics that seeks to provide a choice to dalit communities in the work that they do, and an affirmative recognition politics that seeks to affirm the work that they do as useful. The underlying tension, therefore, is that a cultural re-valuation of domestic work as useful work, is difficult without the simultaneous disruption of the 'division of labourers' (in Ambedkar's famous words). That is to say that it seems difficult to articulate a transformative strategy of a disruption of a division of labour in gendered terms as well as in terms of caste/class relations, without being seen as in conflict with an affirmative politics of recognition.

### **Double Burden: Responsibilities of Women**

In the previous section, I focused on the paid work that dalit women do. In this section, I examine the gendered dimensions of the work that they do in their homes. Using the analytical category of economics, in relation to gender, we have the proposition that there is a division of labour within the 'home'. Using the analytical category of economics in relation to caste, we have the proposition that there is a maldistribution in terms of access to resources. If the analytical category of 'culture'



suggests that women are expected to conform to roles, which includes the responsibility of the home, it would seem that the burdens on dalit women are indeed severe<sup>17</sup>.

### *Unpaid Domestic Labour*

In focus group discussions of gender, in both Doddkunte and Karianapalya slums, one of the overwhelming responses was that women work more than men. This was echoed amongst nearly all the women that I spoke with. The women were responsible for all the household chores as well as the paid domestic work that they performed. Therefore, the women were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and other responsibilities of the household, looking after the children, which included the responsibilities of their education, their health and their general well-being. When asked about the responsibility of men, Lakshamma of the KDWM puts it in the following terms:

Men...we have become something to them...that is why it is always me. For anything, be it for school, for fees, ration card, wherever, for anything at all, I have to go (Narsamma: it is the same in my house) my children are this big, tall SSLC children, and not once has he gone as the '*appa*' (father) to sign, to the headmaster (he doesn't know him)... If I say, 'take them and go', he doesn't know. He doesn't know how to speak to you. Calling aunties '*akka*' (elder sister), calling teachers, '*amma*'. In that role, the children don't like taking him. How to speak to whom, what to call you, what to call her and her...My '*yajamana*' (husband) doesn't have that. It is because of that the children say, "*appa* can't speak, you come, *amma*". Whatever it is, the children have grown up, they are doing SSLC, but he doesn't take them to school even once. I have to take them. If there is a meeting in school, someone calls and I have to run. For the ration card, I have to run around. I have to pay the light bill. For everything, it is me. If I am not around for a day, he cannot manage. Wherever I go, I have to be back home in the evening. (interview, Karianapalya slum)

Lakshamma's conversation is very revealing. While most women acknowledge that they do far more work than the men, Lakshamma also says that this gendered

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<sup>17</sup> The severity of the burdens of work on dalit women is a recurrent theme in much of the literature. See especially Pillai-Vetschera (1999).

division of labour is because the (dalit?) men do not have the cultural capital to deal with the 'outside world'. Women are the ones who have access to the ways of dealing with the world of teachers and headmasters, as well as the establishment. However, the cultural capital that women have is also a debased cultural capital: 'feminine' capital understood as demeaning for men to acquire. It seems therefore, that the injustice is not just in terms of assigning gendered roles to women, but also in terms of the male 'inability' to interact and access this world of broader responsibility, not just in terms of being the breadwinner. This is because of the ethic of care that women are immersed in<sup>18</sup>.

However, this ethic of care also means that women are the ones who support each other amidst the severe burdens that they carry. They are the ones who (are expected to) help each other in the household chores, as well as offer emotional support to each other; and where they do not, there is recrimination. This is reflected in a conversation in Karianpalya slum:

Narsamma: I cannot handle the work. I have to look after the children at home. For three of them, I have to bathe them, wash their hair, send them to school, cook, every job I have to do, and then I go to work and come back and cook. None of my children cook. My second daughter says to me, "Should I cook after I get back from work! I can't, I can't do it. It has to be made and kept, otherwise I will go to bed without.."

Question: Is the responsibility all on you?

Narsamma: Yes, all of it, on me. All the work falls on me.

Lakshamma: We have to share the responsibility... we have to do it for one another.

Narsamma: I cook for the morning and for the afternoon. Shouldn't they do it for the evening? Look, she [one of her daughters] is here, hiding her face. If I ask her to help out at work (outside and inside the house) she makes a long face.

Lakshamma: In my house, my daughters help...(addressing me) now, it is okay, your mother does for you. Tomorrow, if like us, you go to another person's house, you will understand. That is why when you are at your mother's house, you will have to take some responsibility.

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<sup>18</sup> For an interesting overview of the debate on the ethics of care including an analysis of the feminist debate initiated by Carol Gilligan, see Engster, (no date).



Narsamma: I am also planning to give up work (referring to Eshwamma giving up domestic work due to poor health). Doing work here and there, always doing,...for how long?

Lakshamma: Everyone talks about this woman, her situation. It is not like that in our house. I and my daughter fought and left this morning. For something that happened. I yelled, she fought, I hit her, she left abusing me. But, now, if the things for dinner are placed there, she will cook. (conversation, Karianapalya slum)

The entire conversation then shifted to this girl, Sudha, Narsamma's daughter, who was about 18-19 and about how unhappy she made her mother. The fact that she worked, full-time in a factory, unlike her mother, was important to how she understood her responsibilities. The gendered division of labour was re-claimed by her to suggest that she did her share of the work. The rest was not up to her. She did not invest in the ethic of care that the other women were already immersed in. While this can be read as her resistance to gendered roles, it meant that the burdens on the other women in the household were more severe, not that the women then questioned *everyone* who decided that household work did not have value. The reason why Lakshamma is proud of her daughters, one of whom also works full-time in a factory, is that they share her burden of work. They value the work that she does at home and outside. They were not like Narsamma's daughter who felt reluctant to help her mother with domestic work<sup>19</sup>.

However, the sheer burden of work is a recurrent theme, and it is not linked only to a gendered understanding of the roles of women, i.e. to an injury of misrecognition. It is also linked to the economic conditions within which the women live (see Chapter

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<sup>19</sup> For a young dalit woman earning her living in a factory, Sudha could not behave like her brothers, even if she was earning. She *had* to acquire the feminine cultural capital of taking care of the home: cooking, cleaning, sharing the household responsibility. Just as dalit women did not have a choice in taking domestic labour as employment, she, her mother and all of the other women had no choice in relation to the work that they performed in their homes. The only way that they saw to ease the burden was to rely on each other. The issue of having the men and the boys acquire the skills of house work was not a strategy employed.

3). In both Karianapalya and Doddkunte slums, water was available for a few hours on one day of the week, and the burdens of collecting and storing water for the rest of the week for the entire family was on the women. While some of the women had access to a gas stove, most of the women had one kerosene stove. This increased the cooking times considerably. Still further, they had to hand wash the entire family's clothes, clean the utensils and take care of the children (as well as going out to do paid domestic work). Also, there was a perception that the work was never-ending. As the women said, there is no holiday for housework. The older women expected that the younger women would unburden some of the responsibility. As with Lakshmamma, Eshwaramma's daughter would specifically visit her to share her burden of work (focus group discussions on work, Karianapalya, Doddkunte slums). Aside from these expectations on the younger women, the other expectation was on the 'men of the household' to earn more, so that women could be relieved of a part of their double burden.

### ***Dalit Women and Work: A Re-evaluation***

Sr. Celia provides a perceptive account of the burdens of work that dalit women carry, especially when they are poor. She says:

When a person starts working at ten years of age, at the age of 40, she would have already worked for 30 years. When we start in government employment, at what age do we start? Minimum 28-30 years. When they reach 60 years, they retire; they are working for 30 years only. This girl, when she gets to 60 years, she would have worked for 50 years. Lifelong work. (interview, KDWM office)

Yashoda of the DMC also locates the burdens of the work on dalit women. In elaborating on the burdens, she emphasises the strength of dalit women in shouldering a huge burden of responsibilities, and sees the violence in the burdens



that she carries. Situating her argument in the 'feminist' conception of women *transgressing* boundaries by working *outside* the home, she argues:

If a woman goes out to work, the discrimination in terms of wages, the ways in which her sexuality is used; and then she has to come back from her labour and her responsibility to her family, there are violences to her. She doesn't get equal pay, and say she gets Rs.30 as coolie, she has to get food, she has to cook, she has to care for her children's needs, she has to know how to educate her children, what food they should eat, she has to think about all these things, she has to shoulder the responsibility. How much can she shoulder? She has the strength to do it; I am not questioning her ability and her strength, but even though she has the strength, I feel that she has to suffer the violence of it. And what if something happens to the child? How far does Rs.30 go? She has to share this money for the food, how much to spend on taking care of them, on school, on their medicine, and then what do I do for my health? To exist in this society, what do I need to do? These are the many questions that trouble her, though she has transgressed the boundaries, it is still violence according to me. (Interview, DMC)

In this context, Yashoda sets up the 'violence' of the burdens that dalit women shoulder as an *injustice*, set up in terms of mal-distribution as well as misrecognition. The severe maldistribution amongst dalit communities is a burden that the *dalit woman* shoulders; she is the one who cares for the family. While the ethic of care, heightened by the severe maldistribution amongst dalit communities, is the reason for the burden that dalit women shoulder, the absence of the dalit man, is indicative of the gendered aspects of this burden. The injury of misrecognition is also set in terms of the differential wages of women and men.

Yashoda situates dalit women's access to the outside world as a *transgression* (in contrast to dominant caste women). However, she, like Narsamma and the others at KDWM, thinks that there is violence in this 'transgression'. Yashoda argues therefore, that there can be no 'liberation' for dalit women when they are burdened so heavily both at home and outside the home. The injustice is this *burden*. *How much is she to shoulder?* While Narsamma and some of the others at KDWM uphold

the ideal of the gendered division of labour to alleviate the burden of constant work, Yashoda does not seem so willing to do so.

A dalit feminist critique has to contend with not just the caste-based division of labour that sustains the impoverishment of dalit communities, but also the gendered responsibilities that dalit women shoulder. Without integrally critiquing both, women have no choice in the labour that they do, either in their homes or outside. The dalit women at the Young Feminist Conference put it in far more categorical terms. In delineating the differences between dalit women and dominant caste women, Subhadra suggested that dominant caste women do not need to go out to feed the family; whereas for dalit women, labour is controlled outside and inside the family. She is the 'slave of the slaves' (conference, October 1, 2001; also see Manorama, 2001).

To transform the burden of work on dalit women, it seems that it is both gender and caste relations that have to be transformed. Therefore, a dalit feminist critique has to contend with the misrecognition of the gendered nature of the ethic of care, the maldistribution of dalit communities, the misrecognition of dalit communities as meant to perform specific kinds of work and the misrecognition of the nature of women's paid work. However, the gendered roles of women as wives, as mothers and the responsibilities that these entail are also linked to the ways in which the controls on the sexuality of women within dalit communities are understood. This is what I examine in the next section.



## Discourses on Sexuality

The links between caste and sexuality, in terms of the sexual control of women, has been one of the ways in which the *making* of caste has been analysed. Starting with Ambedkar, this theme has been embraced by feminist researchers (Rao, 1999, 2003; Pardeshi, 1997) to argue that, while Ambedkar does not necessarily take a gendered analysis of the making of castes, caste and gender inform each other at the foundational level. The inequalities of 'sexual access' to women of different castes (John, 1999, Dube, 1996), the attendant violence against dalit women (Rao, 1999) and the controls on dominant caste women in terms of seclusion and segregation (Anterjanam, 1998) form part of this matrix of sexuality in relation to caste.

However, this matrix of sexuality and caste is also pitched on different terms. Dube argues that the disabilities accruing to widows occur mostly amongst upper castes as re-marriage for women is permitted amongst lower castes (1996). In a similar vein, Karin Kapadia argues that the meanings of menstruation are different for women of different castes. Dalit women have a far more liberatory understanding of menstruation as fertility, whereas dominant caste women understand it as a bad omen (1995). It seems that the control of sexuality of women is somewhat relaxed for dalit women. Yet, it is they who are more vulnerable to sexual violence. Further, it is dominant caste women who suffer the excesses of the control of sexuality. *Devadasi* women and dominant caste widows stand as spectres at the two extremes of this control of women's sexuality in relation to caste.

It is in this context that I examine the ways in which dalit women understand and construct their sexuality. However, I also want to suggest that to analyse the

constructions of dalit women's sexuality, we have to situate a set of opposing pulls, which manifest themselves in the *language of difference* that is employed by some dalit women to express the construction of sexuality of dalit women and dominant caste women. The opposing pulls are in an understanding of dalit culture as different from dominant caste culture while locating the specific construction of the sexuality of dalit women.

I would like to start the discussion on this difficult subject by looking at questions of sexuality in terms of Fraser's analytical categories in two specific ways. Starting with the presumption that sexuality belongs to culture in Fraser's analytical pair, and that the injustices pertaining to sexuality would have their primary basis in 'culture', I argue that we can examine sexuality and its link to culture in two specific ways. One is by understanding it in terms of the gendered cultural valuation and control of what 'womanhood' means in dominant normative discourse: femininity, heterosexuality, chastity, piety, care-giving form part of this complex matrix. The other, which is linked to the first, is in terms of a caste based cultural valuation and control of 'womanhood' of which endogamy, 'sexual access' to dalit women are manifestations.

While much of this matrix is beyond the scope of this thesis, I have already attempted in the previous sections to locate a particular understanding of the ethic of care and womanhood that dalit women are immersed in. In the following sections, I locate particular discourses of the respondents on heterosexuality and menstruation (determined as they are by a politics of difference), to indicate the tensions in accounting for a dalit feminist politics of sexuality in these specific instances.



### ***DMC: Dalit Culture, Difference and Women's Sexuality***

The discussions on sexuality with the women at DMC were emblematic of the differing pulls for a dalit feminist politics on sexuality that I have located in Chapter 1. In this part, I would like to contrast the many views amongst the women at DMC to signal the dilemmas for a dalit feminist politics on sexuality, especially in the particular politics of the DMC (Chapter 4).

In the last section, I argued that dalit women are burdened with responsibilities, both in terms of the paid and unpaid work that they do. This, I have suggested, can be analysed in terms of the ethic of care that women are immersed in. Yashoda is a lone voice from the DMC to recognise and locate the violence in the burdens that dalit women carry. We have already seen in Chapter 4 that the DMC tends to valorise dalit women as independent, sexually and economically. In this section, I shall flesh out the tendencies towards valorisation by tracing the meanings of heterosexuality and menstruation amongst the women at DMC.

### ***Tracing the Meanings of Heterosexuality***

Rani of the DMC, when asked about dalit women's relationship to marriage and desire, suggests:

The patriarchal system works so deep. But in our communities, the women, many women live without marriage. One of my elder sisters, she was 35 years old but she used to like men a lot, she used to go with everyone, she used to do many things, but she never felt that she should marry and stay with a husband. She used to have pressure from her family, she had many brothers, to get married. She used to like two men. But she used to say that if she got married, she could not live the way she did. "Marriage seems like a prison to me, I cannot do it". She did not get married to either of them. These are instances that one can find in our communities. Sometimes, because of the system, pressure comes to get married. For instance, in my house, at first, while I was studying, there used to be proposals for my marriage. When I got involved with this kind of politics, on debating with my mother, (she) they have lost the concept that I

have to get married. Now they say, if she wants, let her get married. There is no pressure of any sort. What the system has given, we follow in small ways. No one forces violently, in that crude manner to get anyone to get married. This is what I have seen in our communities. (interview, DMC)

In this version of how the patriarchal system works in dalit communities, Rani seems to suggest that while the patriarchal system demands conformity in terms of marriage for women, there are many instances where women have defied the system: where the meanings of marriage are contested successfully. While these stories attest to the rebellion on the parts of these women, Rani seems to then suggest that it is a characteristic of the communities themselves: ‘what the system has given us, we follow in *small* ways. No one forces violently, in that crude manner to get anyone to get married’. Therefore, from an understanding of the pressures on women to marry, and an indication of the strength of women, the understanding then is about the *nature* of the community itself. The underlying assumption in Rani’s account is the contrast with other (dominant caste) communities.

We can read several reasons into this impulse at valorisation of community: refuting an imperialist (casteist) representation of dalit women as abject; an understanding of dalit culture as inherently egalitarian, barring the corruption by the (patriarchal) system; and in the specific context of the politics of the DMC, a performative relation to normative dalit culture<sup>20</sup>. Rani’s implicit assumption in this understanding is that dominant caste culture is probably far more violent towards its women. In such a version, the identification of the injustice against women is caught in a web of

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<sup>20</sup> What I mean by this is that the normative contents of dalit culture are drawn at once from perceptions of dalit history as well as an understanding of how dalit culture should be. For instance, if Rani did concede that there was an injustice amongst dalit communities in terms of gender, she would bracket it by suggesting that ‘this is how things have changed, now’. The separation of dalit history from the normative contents of dalit politics I suggest is crucial for a dalit feminist praxis.



deciphering between the practices of the communities, the imposition of norms as well as the normative content of dalit culture.

I would like to contrast Rani's views with Lakshmi's (another member of the DMC), who understands the implications of marriage in a completely different manner from Rani. In giving the account of her own life, she says:

Lakshmi, you got married as a small girl, and your husband has died. If you stay in the way, it is wrong. If you live separately, it is wrong. If you live at home, it is wrong. "How are you going to deal with and question the 'wrongs' Lakshmi?", the women egg me sometimes. My life/existence, my road, I will find it myself, you don't need that. If you want to learn from me, that is fine, come forward. If you just keep talking and working on the same land, then that is where you will rot/suffer. Leave that situation and come forward. That is a goal is what they cannot say, instead they create pressure. (interview, DMC)

Talking about the pressures of not living under the shadow of protection of a marriage, Lakshmi identifies the injustice that she has experienced as a dalit woman, which in Fraser's analytical pair would be traceable to the category of 'culture'. The injustice is in the imposition of heterosexuality and the attendant understandings of women's place in the world. However, the substantive contents of this culture in relation to *talasthara* communities is understood, by Rani, not in terms of the injustice suffered by Lakshmi, but in terms of the *inherent* space for contestation in *talasthara* communities:

There are a lot of women like Lakshmi in our communities. We cannot bear the thought of someone imposing their will on us. To take the decision to marry is ours. I cannot bear the thought of someone deciding for me and imposing it on my head. I am the one to die with the decision. I believe that in our communities, there aren't a lot of that sort of impositions. (interview, DMC)

In Rani's account, the norm amongst dalit women is that they do not suffer injustices easily. Still further, these injustices do not exist in dalit communities. How then are we to read Lakshmi's signalling the violence in forcible institutionalised

heterosexuality<sup>21</sup>? To decipher the distinctions between Lakshmi's and Rani's accounts, I would suggest that Lakshmi does not invest in the notion of an egalitarian dalit community, either in terms of the real or the imaginary, whereas Rani has invested, as with most of the other members of the DMC, in this ideal, egalitarian dalit community. This then implicates Rani in not identifying injustice relating to the pressures of institutionalised heterosexuality within the community. For her, it exists *in the system, outside her community and with dominant caste women*. And if it does exist among dalit women, the community is able to offer an egalitarian solution, as are the women rebellious enough to claim it. There is therefore a collapsing of the instances of resistance, 'lower caste' reality and the dalit ideal. Further, the transformative potential of dalit women always already exists, as does the egalitarian nature of the communities.

The attempt at a transformative politics, therefore, falls short of offering an account of injustice in times of duress, such as the one experienced by Lakshmi. The inevitability of the 'happy ending' in Rani's account (of Lakshmi's story), is supposed to stand as a testimony to dalit women's strength. However I would suggest that it undermines the articulation of 'Lakshmi's' continuing struggle, as well as the politics of the DMC itself, who are in the process of a struggle against caste and gender based discrimination.

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<sup>21</sup> The point to note is that both Rani and Lakshmi make contrasts *within* heterosexuality, between forms in which women have more control over sexual choices, who (or whether) to marry, etc and forms in which these are imposed. They are not claiming the right to choose non-normative forms of sexuality. The claim, therefore is for (hetero)sexual liberation, not liberation from heterosexuality.



Rani's understanding also contributes to the binary of the liberated dalit woman as against the oppressed dominant caste woman<sup>22</sup>. However, as I have suggested, there are various strands of thinking about the gender question within the DMC. When asked about the perception of the liberated dalit woman, Yashoda suggests:

This has been misunderstood, I think. Sexual relationships are important for everyone, women might have relationships with other men when they are dissatisfied, but that there is no fear or trepidation about social sanction against it is not true. There is a lot of that. (interview, DMC)

This is echoed by the dalit women at the Young Feminist Conference, who suggest that the understanding of a 'liberated sexuality' amongst dalit women has been misplaced (along with other understandings of 'democratic patriarchy'<sup>23</sup>), (conference, Oct 1, 2001).<sup>24</sup> The attempt in these accounts is to retrieve the power of naming gendered violence in the face of the dalit community ideal. However, this is no simple task as I shall show in Yashoda's (of the DMC) shifting meanings of menstruation for dalit women.

### *Tracing the Meanings of Menstruation*

When first asked about the meanings of menstruation in dalit communities and whether or not practices of untouchability followed it Yashoda says:

It is an issue that has been applied. Because Manu has written this book in which he has written these rules and laws, prescriptions for how women should live, 'sati-savitri', similarly, this practise has been imposed on us as women. Why did women accept this? When women were confined to their homes, it became difficult for them to rebel. Now, it is not that each of our periods are individually significant, but in terms of what nature has given us, it is a 'strength' (sakti). Why should we think of it as low? The society has made us think of it like that, that is why they say that we should be confined to certain spaces when we menstruate. It is because we do not understand fully that we have these practices (interview, DMC).

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<sup>22</sup> The dangers based on a politics of (undifferentiated) difference has been explored by me in Chapter 2. The risks of essentialism, of reifying caste and experience, are rife in such a politics.

<sup>23</sup> An understanding of 'democratic patriarchy' is attributable to Kancha Iliah (1996b).

<sup>24</sup> How then are we to retrieve understandings of dalit women's sexuality from these dominant discourses? I would suggest that engaging with the politics that underlie them is the only way in which we can then begin to articulate a dalit feminist politics.

In the reading of menstruation as the power of women, and not as an ill omen, Yashoda attempts to transform the meaning of menstruation. She attributes this violence to 'society', and more specifically to Manu, the Hindu law maker, the epitome of misogyny and control of women's sexuality. In this reading, the practices of menstruation are related to rules about chastity and piety, as well as their devotion to their husbands. Therefore, it is the entire matrix of heterosexuality that she critiques. In this instance, she does not necessarily demarcate between dalit women and dominant caste women. She seems to suggest that the dominant discourse on menstruation is prevalent amongst all women.

Addressing her particular personal circumstances about the practices around menstruation, she says:

As a young girl, during menstruation, under my mother's influence, it is true that I used to stay away from the kitchen. But now, I have broken those rules. But why that is so is because we need rest during our menstruation. If it is because we get tired, it is one thing. If it is out of sympathy,... but as untouchables, as causing impurity, that I break. (interview, DMC)

While talking about the confinement practices in her home, Yashoda seems to suggest that if the confinement is understood in terms of offering women much needed rest, then the confinement practices have positive value.

When asked about whether one could understand the practices in the specific context of dalit communities, Yashoda says:

Let me say it this way. The confinement practices still continue. I cannot say that it is not there anymore. But it is sparse in the *talasthara* communities. They have broken those boundaries. They have moved beyond. To say that they have moved beyond gets me started on another issue. It no longer prevails in our communities now because of our life situation, our context. We have to wash utensils, cook, go out to work, come back, get our children, take care of the husband. This is the situation in the *talasthara* life. We still have to understand that. But, definitely the notion of '*sutka*' (ill omen) does not exist in the *talasthara* communities. (interview, DMC)



Yashoda has come full circle. From an understanding of the transformations of the meanings of menstruation for women, and from an understanding of the reasons for the confinement, she suggests that confinement practices may not be part of *talasthara* culture anymore. She is no longer willing to generalise about confinement practices amongst *talalsthara* communities. She suggests that the communities have moved beyond the violence of confinement because of the socio-economic contexts of dalit people. While she acknowledges that she has been confined (and so has Lakshmi), the understanding that the confinement practices are sparse are to be understood in terms of the changing dalit situation: the socio-economic context of dalit women means that they cannot 'afford' to practice confinement any more. The burden of responsibilities on women prevents them from continuing with confinement practices. Still further, the notion of *sutka* does not exist in dalit communities. I would suggest however, that the understanding of the socio-economic context of dalit communities, as having caused the changes in the practices of confinement, does not necessarily explain why it was practised in the first place. This is especially so if the understanding of menstruation as an ill omen was not the cause for her confinement. Was it to give her the much needed rest?

When asked about the valorisation of community, she spells out the dalit egalitarian ideal in clear terms:

Why we talk about it in these terms is because in our communities, we live a community life accepting differences and diversity. We reject and question violence/oppression. We do not like to be violent/oppressive. In our lives/life systems, there is no oppression. There is violence in what is being forced on us. The fact that we have accepted the notion of 'sutka' is a painful matter. I can't express the pain. The strength in my body, something powerful, that gives me pride, why are they identifying it as ominous? This is a question for me. It is not so in our *talasthara* communities. Why it was practised in *talasthara* communities was so that women could rest at the time of menstruation. (interview, DMC)

There are many conflicting pulls in Yashoda's analysis. Having rejected the understanding of '*sutka*' amongst dalit communities in an earlier instance, she suggests its existence is an imposition on dalit communities. The egalitarian dalit community ideal is now also the logic for the rejection of these practices. Egalitarian dalit communities and the understanding of menstruation as *sutka* do not fit. If confinement practices existed/exist in dalit communities, the reasons for such a practice are that women can get some much needed rest. In this instance, Yashoda dissociates the violence as an imposition from the *outside*. It is not a problem of dalit communities, it is an imposition from dominant caste communities that has to be rejected. The transformative capacities of the dalit community as a whole seems paralysed in this instance.

To step back and analyse the discourses on menstruation, there have been understandings of menstruation practices in terms of fertility amongst dalit communities (Kapadia, 1995). Karin Kapadia relates understandings of menstruation as fertility to the productive and reproductive roles of the communities. It seems therefore that Yashoda and Rani (who suggest that there is no *sutka-patka* in dalit communities) are right in rejecting *sutka* as 'belonging' to dalit communities. It seems that if confinement practices do exist, they are an imposition, and that confinement practices amongst dalit women in times gone by were for egalitarian purposes. However, does this understanding hold in terms of understanding *confinement* as a violence; as a surplus sporadic form of untouchability practised against dalit women? Does the understanding of *sutka* signal a cultural difference between dalit and dominant caste women?



I would suggest that the fusion of the egalitarian dalit community, as historical, as reality, as normative, clouds the naming of the injustice of the violence of menstruation practices against dalit women. While I am not suggesting that it is understandings of *sutka* that explain menstruation practices of dalit women, I am suggesting that to excavate the meanings of menstruation in the context of confinement practices, we have to be careful about whether or not they exist, and if they do, we have to understand them such that we do not fall into the familiar binaries of egalitarian dalit community vs. oppressive dominant caste communities.

### **Conclusion: Dalit Feminism and its Dilemmas**

In this part of the chapter, I have attempted to unravel the injustice that dalit women face both in terms of the paid work that they do in the city, as well as in terms of the double burdens that they shoulder. I started by attempting to sketch the work that dalit women do in the city. While there are a majority of dalit women that work in the contract street cleaners association, the domestic work sector is also dominated by dalit women. The conditions within which paid domestic workers work are difficult. They earn on average about Rs.300 per month from each house. Further, domestic work is not recognised as work by law. Therefore, domestic work is unregulated and there are no norms on minimum pay, holidays, bonuses or maternity benefits, etc. Moreover, domestic work is not valued as useful work. The women at KDWM were interested in dissociating themselves from their permanent association with this work, because of the symbolic violence that such an association entailed. They argue that the conditions within the city have forced them to take up domestic work. Further, they argue that their entry into domestic work is related to the

emasculatation of the dalit male-head of the household, who has not been able to provide for the family. The women are ambivalent about the value of their work. While the DWM and the KDWM have sought to re-value work, in terms of understanding domestic work as useful, productive work, they have also talked about the dignity of the work. However, the framework within which the DWM understands the transformative strategies, is in terms of affirmative redistribution. To dissociate domestic work from dalit women however, there has to be a strategy of deconstruction, as well as a transformative redistribution.

The dalit women domestic workers are not only burdened by domestic work outside the home, but they also have to perform unpaid domestic labour at home. The burdens on dalit women are indeed very severe. Therefore, their working 'outside' the home, it has been argued by some of the respondents, cannot be understood as a transgression of norms of womanhood. While some of the women at KDWM see the solution to unburdening themselves, in the gendered division of labour, others, such as Yashoda of the DMC, see the problems with this understanding. If dalit women are to be unburdened, not only should the issues of the mal-distribution amongst dalit communities be addressed, the gendered division of labour amongst dalit communities should also be dismantled.

Also related to the questions of work, are the discourses around the constructions of women's sexuality in terms of the discourses on care giving and particular forms of heterosexuality. The DMC, with their understanding of *kula-samudaya* as a difference to be celebrated, offer some dilemmas for a dalit feminist politics, because the construction of an egalitarian dalit community does not allow for instance, for the



articulation of the violence of an institutionalised heterosexuality. Further, in relation to the practices of untouchability and confinement around menstruation, the discourses of the DMC collapse an understanding of history, reality and utopia, such that it becomes difficult to excavate not just the confinement practices amongst dalit communities, but also the meanings of such practices. Therefore, with some of the discourses of the DMC, we stand on the brink of a regressive politics of difference.

I would like to conclude this chapter by drawing attention to a particular manifestation of the dilemmas for a dalit feminist politics. When asked about what they thought about '*Streevada*', the term employed for feminism in Kannada, the women present at the DMC office had this discussion:

Sudha: I do not accept the term '*stree*'; I think of myself as '*hengasu*'<sup>25</sup>. The meanings are different. I do not understand what '*stree*' means, I will have to learn, but I think it means something different.

Yashoda: '*Stree*' is the same as '*hengasu*'. Both of them are related to sex. One is identified as '*stree*' based on sex and so is '*hengasu*'.

Sudha: But aren't the assumptions/discourses different?

Yashoda: I don't know that.

Sudha: I still have to understand the notion of '*stree*'.

Rani: She says that she does not understand the term '*stree*' and that she believes that it is different, and that she thinks of herself as a '*hengasu*'. There is no clarity though.

Sudha: It is about why the term '*hengasu*' has been replaced by '*stree*'. It is about '*hengasu*' being low...

Rani: There is no question of high-low in the term '*stree*'.

Yashoda: Why the term '*stree*' has come about is because of culture. It is a cultural term.

Sudha: In the book '*Stree*', it is a term of respect, it denotes good things. '*Hengasu*' is not a good term, it does not conform, in terms of culture.

Rani: It is the system. '*Stree*' works within the system. That is why she says that she identifies herself as a '*hengasu*'. (interview, DMC)

The dissonance with the term *stree* amongst some of the women at DMC is emblematic of the fraught relationship of dalit women with feminism. In Sudha's understanding of the term, dalit women are women, but they are not 'proper' women,

because the construction of women as 'proper' simultaneously constructs dalit women as 'low'. Underlying this disavowal though is the question of *who* the term *stree* refers to. Is it a fictional normative 'who' or a real normative 'other'? The question of the 'other' in relation to a dalit feminist politics is one that needs interrogation for the articulation of a meaningful dalit feminist politics. While it is true and important that we critique a middle class feminist politics that silences the subject of the dalit woman, especially when middle class women represent the interests of 'women' in feminist groups, dalit feminist politics has to discern between differences to be rejected and those that have to be accepted as values for all. As Yashoda of the DMC says:

People have different notions... How I understand it is: feminist issues are the same, but there are different existences. It is about how we deal with and critique our different existences. For example, the moment 'talasthara' women reach liberation doesn't mean that everyone else has as well, that everyone has become equal. I, from the talasthara, if I find, assert and keep my being/existence/identity, when I look at other women's situations, as women, these issues trouble me. Her in her situation, me in mine, it is the same politics. If we talasthara women rise, get liberated, achieve everything, there will still be inequality if other women do not as well. It is not limited to me or us. (interview, DMC)

The inter-connected nature of 'ours' and 'their' lives underlines the stakes involved in the conception of a (dalit) feminist politics for all.

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<sup>25</sup> Though the dictionary provides them as synonyms of each other, I would like to interpret the terms '*hengasu*' as meaning 'woman' and '*stree*' as a 'proper woman', as a closer approximation of Sudha's understanding of the terms.



## Conclusion

My research has been concerned with the subject of dalit women in the city of Bangalore. This has meant a process of locating the tensions in accounting for caste relations in the space of the city, and in accounting for a gendered conception of dalit relations. The purpose of this thesis therefore, has been two-fold: one has been to locate the conditions of dalit communities in Bangalore, and the other has been to unravel a gendered conception of dalit relations amongst these communities. Since there is no monolithic 'dalit woman' or 'dalit community', the attempt has been to locate the conditions of dalit communities, as well as a gendered conception of dalit relations, through an engagement with particular dalit groups in Bangalore.

Whilst the literature on caste is vast, an understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy predominates, not only in sociology, but also in dalit politics, both pre and post independence. However, an understanding of caste as ritual hierarchy poses several questions for an integrated analysis of caste and class. These questions are related to the relegation of caste to the cultural sphere of injustice with the concomitant relegation of class to the economic sphere. While Ambedkar and much of dalit politics has also been concerned with the 'economic' aspects of caste relations, there continues to be a tension in accounting simultaneously for the 'cultural' and 'economic' aspects of injustice.

There is therefore, a disjunction between caste and class, both historically as well as conceptually. The question that persists then is whether, and if so, why, it is important to analyse caste and class together. What is the significance of the historical and conceptual disjunction between caste and class? What are the effects

that this disjunction has on *dalit* communities in the space of the city? And *how* can we resolve it?

In relation to the space of 'the city', there are many conflicting moves in the literature on the nature of caste in urban spaces. First of all, there has been a predominance given to 'the village' in studies on caste. The village is understood as encapsulating the cosmos of Indian civilisation. On the other hand, however, the literature also reflects an analysis of caste as persisting in the space of the city. This has been characterised as the protean nature of caste, where it is the versatility of caste as a structure that is highlighted. The meanings of this versatility, for dalit communities are difficult to assess from such an analysis. There is also a predominant sense that caste is compartmentalised in the city: caste relations are relegated to the 'private' space of the family, allowing for 'secular' practices outside of the family.

This is similar to an understanding of caste and class, where the embarrassment in speaking of caste amongst secular and leftist liberals allows for a disavowal of caste that leaves caste relations un-interrogated. Further, an understanding of urban space as *conducive* to the erosion of the ritual status of caste allows for a conception of 'caste as class' in cities. The implication is that it is *class* relations that are significant in the city. This argument is given some amount of credence by the conception of the village in the dalit imagination. An equation of the village with caste-life in dalit politics has with it an inherent conception of cities as more amenable to caste-free life. While there has been a tempering of this dualistic conception from some quarters, I have argued that there is another disjunction, between caste relations and



the space of the city. Again, the question that persists is whether, and if so why it is important to locate caste relations in the space of the city. What is the significance of the disjunction between caste relations and the space of the city, for dalit communities in urban spaces? What therefore is the relevance of locating the specific conditions of dalit communities in the context of urban space?

In relation to caste and gender, the literature tends to revolve around the themes of controls on sexuality and access to economic resources. These themes are also understood to demarcate the *differences* between women of different caste communities. These differences have a history that is mired in colonial engagement. On the other hand lies a *conceptual* understanding of *brahminical* patriarchy which speaks of the connections between caste status, women's productive roles, as well as the sexual controls on women. To be more specific, an understanding of *brahminical* patriarchy argues that there is an inverse relation with caste status and women's seclusion. However, such a conception does not easily allow for an interrogation of the patriarchal conditions of dalit women's lives in *intra*-caste relations. In fact, there has been very little analysis that has sought to interrogate a 'dalit patriarchy'. Further, in locating the specificity of dalit women's lives, there is a tendency to get tied up in essentialisms. This tendency is connected, amongst other things, to a 'politics of difference'.

In this thesis, therefore, I argue that to understand the conditions and the injustices against dalit women in Bangalore, we have to make sense of the disjunction between caste and class, and between caste and the space of the city. I argue that in order to articulate a meaningful dalit feminist politics, *qua* Fraser, we have to interrogate the

politics of difference, to sift through what differences need to be rejected, celebrated or taken on as an ethic for everyone. Further, I suggest that the disjunction between caste and class, as one between 'culture' and 'economics', both historically and conceptually is important because of the substantive absences as well as the analytical priority that is given to one or the other injustice in 'dalit' and 'class' politics. The grave consequence is when they are perceived to be in conflict with one another, such as when dalit politics is understood to be engaged in 'identity' politics, or when Marx is posited against Ambedkar.

To retrieve the value of naming cultural and economic injustices as *equally* important in people's lives, I have used Fraser's argument that it might be more useful to use culture and economics as *analytical* categories to identify various kinds of injustice amongst different communities. This, I suggest, allows us to interrogate the cultural and the economic bases of the injustice perpetrated against various communities, whether identified as slum communities, dalit communities, domestic workers or street cleaners. It also allows us to interrogate the points of congruence as well as the points of fissure between these communities. Further, if we use Fraser's framework of transformation, affirmation, redistribution and recognition, we can sift through the strategies that different groups and communities employ to transform the conditions of their lives.

The city of Bangalore has gained an international reputation as a hi-tech city, proficient in the IT sector and well on its way to much vaunted economic growth. However, the twin registers of the remembered and imagined city that Janaki Nair has identified, have increasingly come to *illegitimise* the claims of the poor in the



city. The slums of the city therefore, provide a stark contrast to the aspirations of governmental planning, the entrepreneurial dreams of the IT sector as well as the remembered and imagined registers of Bangalore's citizenry.

The latest official figures put the number of slums at 1.85 million, about 26% of the population of Bangalore, i.e. about one in every four people in Bangalore live in its slums. There is a preponderance of dalit communities in the slums of Bangalore. Slums are also largely populated by (dalit) Christian, Muslim and other 'backward classes'. Further, there is a large number of (rural migrant) Tamil, Kannada, Urdu and Telugu speaking communities living in the slums of Bangalore. Therefore, while poor communities live in the slums of Bangalore, there are also differences between these communities in terms of ethnicity, religion and caste.

Slum communities do not have easy access to basic facilities such as water and sanitation. They also live under the threat of eviction, heightened by the recent increase in tempo of the interests of various stakeholders in the visions for Bangalore. In such a context, slum politics stands as a politics that argues for the legitimacy of the poor in urban spaces, as well as the legitimacy of the claims for secure tenure, basic facilities, as well as changes in policy related to land use, amongst other claims. However, the focus of slum politics is on the economic context of the urban poor. On the other hand, there is a growing linguistic and dalit politics that have sought to re-territorialise the city through the use of symbols. Is there then a disjunction between dalit and slum politics in Bangalore? I have argued that although many of the dalit leaders in slums are not part of organised dalit mass movements, there are several dalit groups that work in and out of the city. The early

politics of the DSS, I argue, provides a useful context to situate the influences on a dalit politics in Bangalore.

The DSS has engaged with the dalit identity in several ways, taking in the diverse influences of Ambedkarism, Lohiaism and Marxism. They have broadened the epistemic boundaries to include 'backward classes', while holding onto the non-negotiable boundaries of 'untouchable' castes. They have also sought to consolidate 'untouchable' communities under the rubric of the term 'dalit'. Therefore, in Fraser's matrix, they have attempted to conceive of dalit communities as bivalent communities, with injustices being traceable to both the cultural and economic orders. However, whilst there continues to be a tension in the analytical priorities given to one or the other injustice, the ways in which the DSS conceives of the term 'dalit' also poses particular problems for identifying the cultural and economic hierarchies *within dalit* communities.

The village and rural India are central to the symbolic imaginary of DSS politics in analysing caste based injustice. How then does this translate into the politics of dalit communities and groups in Bangalore? To locate dalit politics in Bangalore I have engaged with several groups, either composed of dalit communities, and/or engaged in dalit politics in Bangalore. I have argued that it is important to identify the ways in which they use the category of dalit and for what purposes, in the particular context of the city of Bangalore. An understanding of caste identity as contested and in the process of formulation and re-formulation, allowed me to locate the ways in which groups are identified by others in an engagement rife with symbolic violence as well as the ways in which groups identify themselves. Further, such an understanding also



allowed me to locate the cultural and economic injustice that different groups identify as shaping their identities as dalits, as slum dwellers, as women, as domestic workers, as *madiga*, etc.

To reprise the research questions of this thesis therefore, the first research question was concerned with questions of labelling, both in terms of self-identification as well as identification by others, and the varying stakes or investments groups or individuals had with these labels. The second research question was concerned with the politics of untouchability, the ways in which it was understood, the strategies deployed to resist, disrupt and subvert it, its gendered manifestations and its specific relation to the city. The third research question centred on the division of labour within caste communities and the sexual division of labour within dalit communities in the context of Bangalore, whilst examining the dilemmas that each of them throws up for a dalit and feminist politics.

In examining these questions, I centred the politics of three disparate ‘dalit’ groups, the DMC, the MRHS and the KDWM. The DMC is a group of young dalit activists who work in the outskirts as well as in the urban context of Bangalore. They are a group that centres the transformative potential of dalit communities. Much of their politics is engaged in rejecting a structural view of caste. In the processes of their engagement with the term ‘dalit’, they came to reject it because they suggest that the term is itself an oppressive category of identification. It was a term by which they were identified as low, as broken, not one by which they chose to identify themselves. The DMC then engaged with a conception of caste relations in terms of *kula-samudaya* – caste communities. This allowed for an understanding of caste-

communities as equal, but different cultural groups. However, such an understanding did not allow for an analysis of the injustice of mal-distribution in dalit communities. Therefore, the DMC moved onto a self-definition in terms of being part of the *talasthara* – foundation - of society. In doing so, the DMC centred economic relations.

However, the DMC continues to hold onto an understanding of caste relations in terms of cultural difference as well as in terms of the economic usefulness of particular communities. But, in their conception of the caste hierarchy, it is overwhelmingly a misrecognition that is central to the injustice that is perpetrated on ‘dalit’ communities. The DMC’s particular understanding of caste relations in terms of cultural difference *can* be problematic for a conception of dalit feminist politics. Not only is this because their politics does not allow for the naming of *injustice* because of the symbolic violence that this entails, but also that in valorising dalit culture, they tend to romanticise the condition of dalit women’s lives, thereby not articulating the injustice perpetrated on dalit women.

The MRHS, on the other hand, in their focus on reservation issues, hold onto the conflicting moves of having (a differing) investment in the term dalit, even as they argue for a redistributive strategy, for a particular dalit community- the *madiga* community. However, they provide the basis for a critique of dalit identity, both in terms of the injustice of misrecognition as well as maldistribution. The MRHS has not incorporated a gendered analysis in their redistributive politics. While there are women in the cadres of the MRHS, they have no women in the leadership of the group. The MRHS has the potential to centre women in their politics, because they



are a group that have identified the *particular* injustice amongst a larger dalit fraternity. Therefore, it is methodologically possible and politically imperative that they account for the injustice that *madiga* women face, both in terms of maldistribution, as well as misrecognition in both intra and inter caste relations.

The KDWM is completely different from the other two groups. While being composed of *madiga* and dalit Christian women, because it centres the work that they do, the organisation do not focus on the caste identities of the women. There is moreover, a separation between the leadership of the group as well as the group itself. Amongst the women domestic workers, there is no immediate sense of defiant pride in their *madiga* and dalit Christian identities because of the symbolic violence associated with an external identification of the terms. Further, since the KDWM is a group that is engaged in the organisation of domestic workers, the identities of the women as poor, as slum residents, as women workers, are given predominance. The discourse of the group does not easily allow for making the connections with their work, the places that they live, the conditions in which they live and their *caste* identity.

Whilst talking about the injustices that affected their lives, untouchability as a symbolic frame of reference and as a manifestation of violence and discrimination, was predominantly what the groups identified as structuring their lives. I sought to engage with the ways in which each of the groups specified the injustice that this entailed, as well as the ways in which they sought to transform them. Part of this process was an engagement with the meanings of untouchability in the space of the

city, as well as a gendered conception of untouchability. Inter-woven in this process is the politics of naming of an injustice as untouchability.

The DMC's strategy for dealing with untouchability is to deconstruct its meanings through a radical refashioning of the sense of self of both dalit communities and dominant caste communities by shifting the associations of untouchability to the perpetrators of the violence. However, they also dissipate the power of this deconstructive strategy by suggesting that they were instrumental in the evolution of the concept of 'untouchable', albeit one in which *they* demanded not to be touched. I argue that this is a dissipation because such an understanding will not stick in times of duress.

Apart from the politics of naming the violence of untouchability as such, there are ways in which we have to account for a gendered analysis of it. I argue that we have to make distinctions between the *untouchability* that affects women of different castes so that we can situate its specific manifestation in the lives of dalit women. While suggesting that the sporadic surplus untouchability experienced by dalit women is related to their sexuality, I indicate the ways in which untouchability is determined by caste relations.

Although there seems to be an inability to articulate the nature of untouchability in the city in the first instance, the manifestations of untouchability *are* present in the city. However, if we are to name particular instances of violence as untouchability, we have to engage with not only a politics of naming the violence as such, but also an understanding of caste relations in the space of the city. There are two prominent



ways in which untouchability has been understood by my respondents: food relations and relations of work.

With regard to the politics of food, I situate a broad food hierarchy in India at the heart of which are the principle of the sacredness of the cow and an understanding of a graded hierarchy of living things. Located in a climate of right-wing ascendancy, the violence of the food hierarchy for those who do not conform is very real. In such a context, I have located in the discourses of the respondents, strategies at disrupting this hierarchy. While some of the strategies of the groups are engaged in disrupting the cultural valuational principle that allows for a conception of beef-eating as immoral, through a disruption of the sacredness of the cow, as well as by exposing the hypocrisies of the non-beef eating population, there are other strategies of opposing the food hierarchy in terms of the economic conditions that produce the cultural consumption of food.

In relation to work, I have attempted to sketch out the work that dalit women do in the city. While there are a majority of dalit women that work in the contract street cleaners association, the domestic work sector is also dominated by dalit women. The conditions within which paid domestic workers work are difficult and domestic work is not recognised as work by law. It is unregulated, there are no norms on minimum pay, holidays, bonus, maternity benefits, etc. and domestic work is not valued as useful work. The women at KDWM while dissociating themselves from their permanent association with this work argue that the conditions within the city have forced them to take up domestic work. Further, they argue that their entry into domestic work is related to the emasculation of the dalit male-head of the household,

who has not been able to provide for the family. The women are ambivalent about the value of their work. While the DWM and the KDWM have sought to re-value work, in terms of understanding domestic work as useful, productive work, they have also talked about the dignity of the work.

The dalit women domestic workers are not only burdened by domestic work outside the home, but they also have to perform unpaid domestic labour at home. Therefore, their working 'outside' the home, it has been argued by some of the respondents, cannot be understood as a transgression of norms of womanhood. While some of the women at KDWM see the solution to unburdening themselves in the gendered division of labour, others, such as Yashoda of the DMC see the problems with this understanding. Therefore, it seems that if dalit women are to be unburdened, not only should the issues of the mal-distribution amongst dalit communities be addressed, the gendered division of labour within dalit communities should also be dismantled.

Also related to the questions of work are the discourses around the constructions of women's sexuality, in terms of the discourses on care giving and particular forms of heterosexuality. The DMC, with their understanding of *kula-samudaya* as a difference to be celebrated offer some dilemmas for a dalit feminist politics. The construction of an egalitarian dalit community does not allow for an interrogation of the violence of an institutionalised heterosexuality. This is because the conception of an egalitarian dalit community tends to relegate 'patriarchal' practices as part of the 'system' and not belonging to dalit communities. While, as an *ideal*, such an analysis is powerful, there is a tendency to collapse the ideal into reality, thereby foreclosing the possibility of naming an injustice as such. This is also exemplified in DMC's



engagement with the violence of untouchability and confinement in relation to menstruation. In DMC's account, it becomes difficult to demarcate between an understanding of history, reality and ideal, such that it becomes difficult to excavate not just the confinement practices amongst dalit communities, but also the meanings of such practices. Therefore, we stand on the brink of a regressive politics of difference with some of the discourses of the DMC.

A dalit feminist politics is still to find a firm footing in the context of the politics of Bangalore, as evidenced by the groups that I have engaged with in the course of the thesis. While KDWM and the MRHS do not engage with a feminist politics, the women at KDWM situate the difficulties in conceiving of a feminist politics for dalit women, without also centring dalit politics. The DMC, on the other hand, by centring dalit politics in its conception of gendered relations does not allow for a conception of gendered injustice amongst dalit communities, thereby foreclosing the possibility of a dalit feminist politics. Further, dalit politics in Bangalore stands at an oblique to slum politics. While there is much that is common amongst the two, if we are to account for the various injustices that dalit and slum communities face in Bangalore, it is imperative that we seek to hold on to the *equal* importance of cultural and economic aspects of justice.

In this thesis, I have been concerned with unearthing the subject of dalit women in the context of the city of Bangalore. This has necessarily meant a process of confronting the conception of the space of the city as conducive to caste-free life. It is dalit women who service the city, they labour to keep the city clean, both in

‘public’ spaces as well as ‘private’ ones. This thesis firmly places itself in dispelling the myth of caste-free lives in the city of Bangalore.

Nancy Fraser offers an utopian vision of political parity in her framework for a transformative politics. In setting out her framework, she argues that it is important to sift through differences between communities that are to be celebrated, rejected or taken on as an ethic for everyone. Offering culture and economics as analytical categories, she sets out a framework to ensure participatory parity by assessing whether claims for recognition and redistribution are aimed at affirmation or transformation. The utopian element is immensely important in keeping longer-term goals in place and under discussion. However, as we have seen through the course of this thesis, this utopian balance is difficult to maintain in the light of political strategies (invariably affirmative moves) of the groups. These political moves of affirmation (as with the valorisation of beef-eating amongst dalit communities, and the redistributive strategy of reservation for jobs and education) are strategically necessary at times, but carry the risks of perpetuating historically contingent group characteristics and practices which are difficult to escape. There seems to be a tension therefore between the politically strategic affirmation and the utopian ideal of transformation, but I wish to argue that neither should be abandoned. Both are necessary and necessarily in tension.

Therefore, for instance, whilst it should be possible to relinquish beef without betraying caste identity, until the deep embeddedness of food practices in an oppressive symbolic hierarchy are radically deconstructed, there is a danger that caste mobilisation will bind members to historically contingent caste practises that



they may wish to change. An affirmative politics of difference may nevertheless be understood as part of the process of dismantling hierarchies. It may be understood as a contingent strategy rather than as a fundamental political/theoretical position. Consequently, whilst it is important to point out the tensions and contradictions amongst the groups, they cannot be resolved at levels of academic work alone, but through ongoing political processes. It is important however that these political processes contend with the silences on the subject of caste relations in the space of the city and in relation to dalit women in particular, because even contingent political strategies are meaningless if they cannot account for particular forms of *injustice*: against dalit women and in the context of caste relations in the city. To this extent, dalit groups in Bangalore have to take a political position.

## Appendix A: List of Interviews

### Focus Group Discussions/Group Interviews

GROUP	DATE	LOCATION	SUBJECT	PARTICIPANTS
DMC	January 26 2002	DMC Office	DMC politics on dalit, <i>kula-samudaya</i> and <i>talasthara</i>	Chenappa, Yashoda, Sudha, Rani, Lakshamma, Kasim, Chandru, Jayaram, Shiva, Ratna
	February 14, 2002	DMC office	Untouchability and food relations	Jayaram, Chenappa, Yashoda, Sudha, Rani, Lakshamma, Ratna
	March 5, 2002	DMC office	Caste and Gender	Yashoda, Sudha, Rani and Lakshamma
	August 25, 2001	Doddkunte slum	Gender roles (with Indu, HSS)	Sagai Mary, Anjalie, Sr. Celia, Mary, Sashi, Kanikya Mary, Lakshmi, Josephine, Pari, Chitra, Kala
KDWM	Sept 3, 2001	Doddkunte slum	Gender roles	Gowamma, Prabha, Saraswathy, Sr. Celia, Balamma, Bairamma, Shakuntala, Vasanthi, Sasi, Usha
	Sept 12, 2001	Doddkunte	Paid domestic work	Gowamma, Prabha, Vasanthi, Sr. Celia, Bairamma, Shakuntala, Sasi, Usha
	Sept 20, 2001	KDWM office	Paid domestic work (with Chitra, ALF)	Sagai Mary, Anjalie, Sr. Celia, Mary, Sashi, Kanikya Mary, Lakshmi, Josephine, Pari, Chitra, Kala
	Sept 25, 2001	Doddkunte slum	Caste identity	Sagai Mary, Anjalie, Sr. Celia, Mary, Kanikya Mary, Lakshmi, Josephine, Pari, Kala, Meenakshi
	Oct 4, 2001	Karinapalya slum	Caste identity	Lakshamma, Eshwaramma, Narsamma, Anusuyamma, Sr. Celia, Mary, Bali, Sakamma



KDWM	Oct 14, 2001	Doddkunte slum	Caste identity	Gowramma, Prabha, Saraswathy, Sr. Celia, Balamma, Bairamma, Shakuntala, Vasanthi, Sasi, Usha
	Nov 8, 2001	KDWM office	Sexuality (with Chitra, ALF)	Lakshamma, Narsamma, Chitra, Pari, Anjolie, Kanikya Mary, Irudaya Mary, Vasathi, Meenakshi, Sr. Celia
	Nov 27, 2001	KDWM office	Domestic violence	Bali, Narsamma, Sakamma, Pari, Sr Celia, Irudaya Mary, Vijayalakshmi, Sasi, Kanikya Mary, Lakshamma, Eshwaramma
	December 7, 2001	KDWM office	work and caste identity	Sr. Celia, Narsamma, Sasi, Kanikya Mary, Lakshamma, Eshwaramma
	Dec 17, 2001	Doddkunte	work and caste identity	Sagai Mary, Anjalie, Sr. Celia, Mary, Kanikya Mary, Lakshmi, Pari, Chitra, Josephine
	Jan 12, 2002	Karianpalya	Caste and untouchability	Narsamma, Lakshamma, Eshwaramma, Mary, Sudha

### Individual Interviews

- Sr. Celia (KDWM) Interview, KDWM office, February 13, 2002
- Parthasarathy (MRHS) Interview, Samvada office, February 1, 2002
- Ganganna (DKD and MRHS) Interview, Samvada office, March 8, 2002
- Chandru (MRHS) Interview, Samvada office, November 15, 2001
- Keshavmurthy (GPS and MRHS) Interview, Samvada office, March 2, 2002



## Appendix B: Political Map of India



<http://www.shunya.net/Pictures/india-map.jpg>



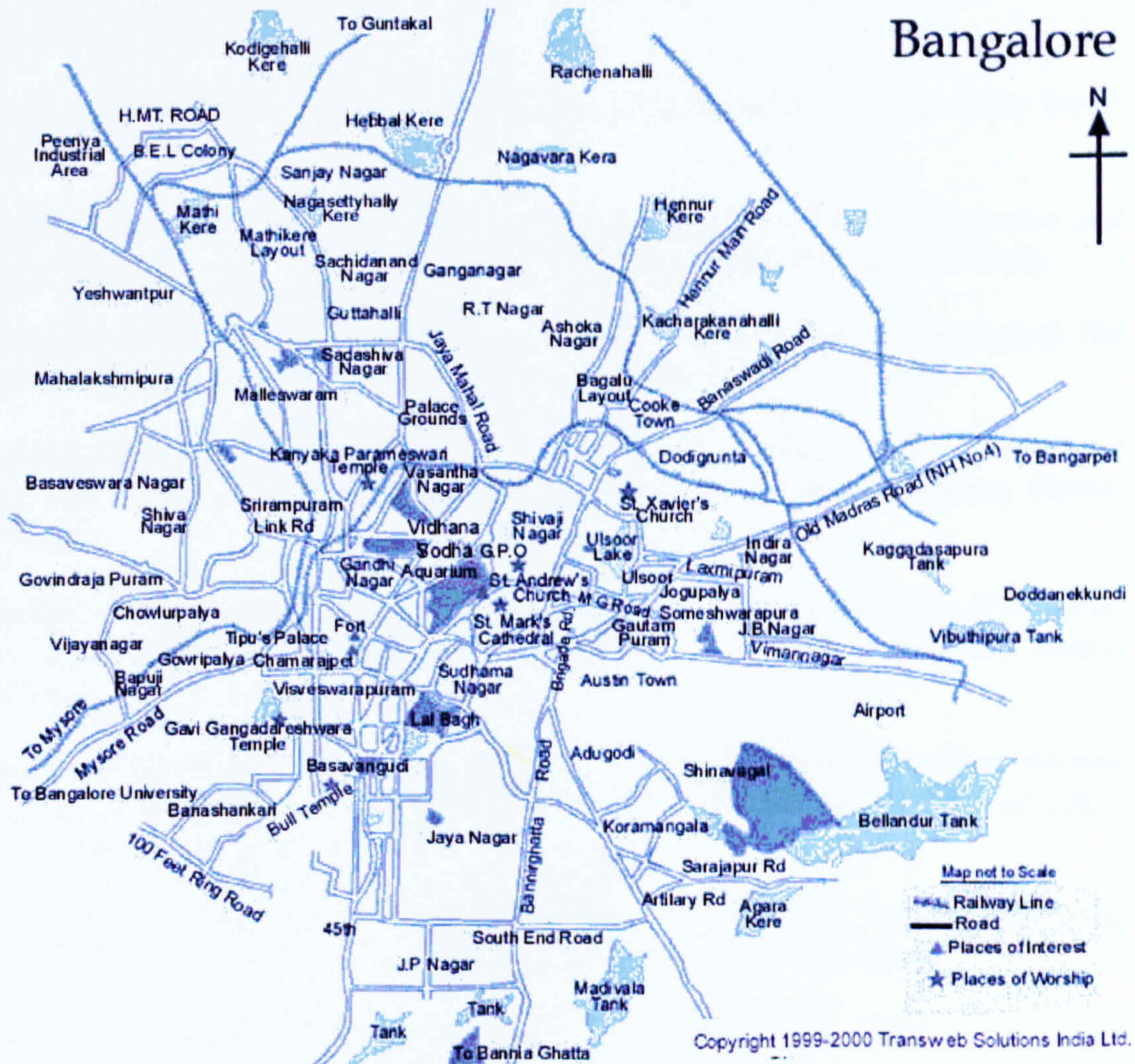
## Appendix C: City Map of Bangalore



<http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/karnataka/bangalore1.gif>



## Appendix C: Bangalore City Center



<http://www.thebharat.com/maps/karnataka/html/bangalore/image/bangalore.gif>



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